

Slytherin Rising, Part Two: Slytherin On The Wane

by J. L. Matthews

Chapter One Platform Nine and Three Quarters

September 1st, 1991. Platform Nine and Three Quarters, King's Cross Station, London.

"Where are they?" Deanna Tyler was saying anxiously. "They're surely here somewhere aren't they?" She cast concerned looks around the platform, dark eyes scanning every face. Deanna Tyler, a third year student at Hogwarts School, was a shorter than average young girl, rather thin, with shoulder-length jet black hair to match her eyes, high sharp cheekbones, delicately pointed nose turned up at the end, one of the few features she shared with her mother, and a tough, aggressive manner which could be easily misleading as to her true character.

"Course they are." her best friend Luella Martin said calmly. "They're hardly going to miss the Hogwarts Express, are they? I mean, Marlie might, but I can't see Rianne wanting to avoid school. Not to mention a certain Potions Master we all know and, er, know." Luella, only a month older than Deanna and her inseparable partner in crime, about the same height but slightly chubbier in build, was fiddling absently with a strand of chestnut-brown hair that had come loose from it's usual ponytail, silvery-blue eyes gazing at Deanna in amusement.

"Luella Martin, can you be referring to Professor Snape?" Deanna's mother said wryly. Caitlin Tyler, Deputy Head of the Department of Dark Arts Eradication and a renowned Auror, was dressed for the work she would soon be heading back to, in a charcoal grey Muggle trouser suit worn under a dark blue cloak which set off her honey-blonde hair nicely. She was attracting not a few admiring glances from various passing wizards, at least until their wives noticed.

"Of course. Why, has he retired? Are we getting a new Potions teacher?" Luella said, feigning surprise. Mrs. Tyler laughed.

"No, of course he hasn't. He's only my age! Not a word out of you, Deanna." she said sharply to her daughter who was grinning fiendishly.

"Never dreamt of saying anything, mother dearest." Deanna said innocently. Mrs. Tyler chose to turn a blind eye as a flash of platinum blond hair caught her attention.

"Hi there Mel!" she called out, fully expecting to come face to face with her friend and colleague Melissa Lovegood, Head of the Department of Dark Arts Eradication. The woman she'd been addressing turned around. Mrs. Tyler stopped short.

It wasn't Melissa Lovegood at all, but she did look exceedingly like her. Same cool blue eyes, same pale blonde hair. However, the similarities ended there. Melissa's

usual conservative style was a huge contrast to the sleek robes, mink cloak, rather too much make-up and expensive jewellery this witch was wearing. Luella was reminded of a blonde Morticia Addams with Cruella De Ville's dress sense. Mrs. Tyler said nothing, just gazed at her quietly.

The woman looked back uncertainly. "Caitlin Tyler?" she said incredulously. Mrs. Tyler nodded. The other witch gazed at her. Her lips curled into an unpleasant smile.

"Never thought I'd see you here of all places. When did you settle down with a nice wizard and raise a family, then? Oh, but of course. You didn't, did you? Who knows where that fatherless brat of yours came from?" She looked pityingly at Deanna, who stared back at her in shock and fury.

Luella looked fearfully at Mrs. Tyler. It was true, Deanna was born out of wedlock and no one knew who her father was. Mrs. Tyler had always refused to speak about him. However, there had always been a pretence that Mrs. Tyler had been married but her husband had been killed by Lord Voldemort, the most evil Dark wizard ever, before Deanna was born. Which explained why Mrs. Tyler had gone cold all of a sudden and was gazing back at this woman with unbridled hatred.

"Watch it, Narcissa." Mrs. Tyler said quietly. "The only reason your husband's not in Azkaban is because certain individuals in the Ministry were too naive to see his true colours. Tread carefully, or you might find the rest of us taking more of an interest in his activities."

Luella's ears pricked up at the mention of the woman's name. This must be Narcissa Malfoy, Melissa Lovegood's estranged sister, renowned cat breeder and ornamental gardener, and wife of one-time suspected Death Eater and pillar of the magical community Lucius Malfoy. She'd heard her mentioned before by her friend Marlie Lovegood, Melissa Lovegood's daughter. And it had not been complimentary.

Narcissa sneered. "Well, let's hope you make a better Auror than you do a mother. Goodbye Caitlin. Give my regards to my darling sister, won't you?" And with that, she turned, walking towards an arrogant-looking blond wizard who Luella recognised as her husband Lucius, who she'd once seen a picture of, and a young boy who from the look of him must be their son.

Mrs. Tyler watched her go with a look of undisguised rage. "Oh, how I hate that family." she whispered quietly, shaking with fury.

"One day, Caitlin. One day." a woman's voice came from behind them. The three of them turned to see another blonde witch, looking very like Narcissa Malfoy, except without the permanent sneer. Not to mention the fact that she was dressed simply in a pinstripe trouser suit, with her short blonde hair pinned back out of her eyes, no make up and a pair of understated but expensive looking glasses. Walking down a busy street in Muggle London, she wouldn't have attracted a second glance. Luella had always thought of her as a younger, blonde version of her Transfiguration teacher, Professor McGonagall.

Melissa Lovegood gazed at her sister with a strange look in her eyes. "Narcissa, Narcissa, why did you take up with him? You could have been so much more, you wanted to be Minister of Magic once!" She shook herself before patting Mrs. Tyler's shoulder. "One day, Caitlin, I promise you. We'll have enough evidence to get Malfoy in Azkaban where he belongs, and Narcissa will find out what it's like to raise a child on her own." She noticed a wide-eyed Deanna and Luella, and her expression relaxed. "Hello again. Looking forward to the new term?"

Deanna recovered herself. "Auntie Mel, who was that? Was that your sister?"

"Yes, she was. I hope you'll not judge the rest of the Harker family by her. The Lovegood branch have nothing to do with those Malfoys." She pronounced Malfoy as if it were an expletive.

They were joined by the rest of the Lovegood family at this point. Michael Lovegood, fifth year, Beater on the Slytherin Quidditch team, and Marlene, otherwise known as Marlie, third year and Slytherin Seeker. Once again, Luella couldn't get over how different Marlie was these days, how much the past two years and certain experiences in her first year had changed her. Gone was the nervousness, the insecurity, the pigtails and the desperate desire to be accepted that Luella had picked out when they'd first met in Diagon Alley two years ago. Marlie was now wearing her hair loose and it was flowing all the way down to her waist. Plus she appeared to have grown a foot in height. Perhaps the biggest change, however, was that Marlie was now grinning boldly, walking tall and ready to burst on to the scene like the celebrity Deanna had often commented that Marlie seemed to think she was.

"Hiya, you guys!" Marlie cried out. "All ready to rock Hogwarts for a third year of mischief and mayhem?"

"Too right, Lovegood!" Deanna grinned. "Just try not to get yourself poisoned this year, I'm not coming in to rescue you again."

Marlie just laughed, although the rest of her family looked rather less happy. Luella remembered the events to which Deanna was referring to well. Marlie had been slipped a dose of the lethal Sleeping Death potion which had sent her into a coma for the best part of her first year, and it had taken Deanna entering her dreams to give her a hand before she was able to wake up. All very well to laugh about it now, but it had caused untold grief at the time. Both Deanna and Marlie had nearly died.

Mrs. Lovegood swiftly changed the subject. "Caitlin, have you seen the Stormosis yet? I daresay your lot are looking forward to seeing them again; I know mine are."

Mrs. Tyler smiled. "Judging by the amount of red hair in that direction, I'd say that's them."

The four children peered over rather more critically. "Nah." Mike said at length. "That's the Weasley clan."

"Oh gods." Marlie groaned. "Well, let's keep quiet and leave them alone, I don't want Fred and George to notice me. Bane of my life, those two. Incidentally, Fred told me

their youngest boy Ron starts this year. Oh wonderful, another Weasley to annoy the hell out of me."

Deanna and Luella grinned. The Lovegoods and Weasleys were near neighbours down in Devon, and although their parents got on well enough, the respective children were rather less friendly. Marlie and the twins in particular enjoyed a love-hate relationship characterised by mutual taunting, and not helped by the fact they played on rival Quidditch teams.

"S'alright, Marls, we'll look after you." Deanna grinned. "Come on, Lu, let's find Ri, get the Gang of Four reconstituted. After me, fellow Slythies!" With that, she was off, Marlie in tow. Mike grinned and sauntered after them, his keen Beater eyes swiftly picking out the auburn haired Stormosi girls.

Luella ran after them, as the two mothers moved away to talk in private. Not looking where she was going, she ran straight into someone.

"Oh!" she gasped. "Sorry, I should have looked. Are you alright?"

She gave a hand to the boy she'd just knocked over. Small, he was, with glasses sellotaped together, clothes that didn't really fit him and untidy black hair. Luella immediately felt her heart go out to him. From the look of him, he could only be a first year and given the absence of family, a Muggle-born like her at that.

"I'm fine." he said nervously. His accent gave her few clues about him, but he sounded like he had the same middle-class Surrey background she did. Surprising, given that he looked like he was wearing hand-me-downs. In fact, she was sure she'd seen him somewhere before, but couldn't for the life of her remember where.

"You're a first year, aren't you?" Luella said kindly. "Here, let me give you a hand with that trunk. It must weigh a ton, I know mine does. *Wingardium Leviosa!*" She waved her wand, enjoying the feeling of being able to use magic again after a long summer holiday without it. The trunk immediately rose up and hovered a few feet in the air.

"There!" Luella said with satisfaction. "How's that?" The boy gasped in amazement.

"Oh my god!" he whispered. "How?"

Luella grinned. "Levitation Charm. First year magic so you'll be more than capable of that yourself this time next year. I'm Luella Martin, by the way. Third year witch, Slytherin, of Muggle parentage. What's your name?"

"Harry." the boy said quietly. He looked at Luella with a troubled expression. "Slytherin? But aren't Slytherins...?" He stopped talking, clearly unwilling to say anything else. Luella sighed. This was the usual reaction, but it didn't make things any easier.

"Untrustworthy, manipulative bastards? Yes, don't worry, I'm quite used to that reaction. Some of us are like that. But we're not all completely evil. We're ambitious,

but some of us have ethics. Take me for instance. All I'm really ambitious about at the moment is doing well at school. No idea how I ended up in Slytherin really, everyone keeps telling me I should have been in Ravenclaw. In fact, I tried manipulation once in my first year, and it went spectacularly wrong." She smiled warmly. Harry seemed to relax a little.

"What happened?" he asked curiously. "Did you not get what you wanted?"

Luella thought back. She'd got what she wanted alright, but it was the aftermath that had been the problem.

"Well, it worked. Then he found out about it, and I was in serious trouble. Anyway, I felt so bad about doing it, I gave up. Of course, it didn't help that it was my House Head that I tried to manipulate."

Harry was agog. "You tried to manipulate a teacher?"

"Yes. Bad idea. Very bad idea. Not to be copied. Especially not with Professor Snape. I mean, I had a very good reason, I might add, but it was not something I'll be doing again. I'm Honest Lu now."

Harry tried not to laugh. "Makes you sound like a used car dealer."

Luella burst out laughing. "It does, doesn't it! Ah well. As long as my friend Deanna doesn't hear about it, or I'll spend the rest of my schooldays getting teased about it. Mates, eh? Can't live with them, can't have a contract taken out on them. I was joking, by the way." she added hastily, seeing Harry's eyes widen in shock.

"Oh. Right." Harry seemed a little uncertain of how to react to that. He ran his fingers through his hair nervously. Luella couldn't help noticing a lightning-shaped scar on his forehead.

"Where'd you get that?" she gasped, reaching out to touch it. Harry flinched and Luella withdrew her arm.

"Doesn't matter." he said quickly. Luella backed off. Despite her curiosity, she had no wish to pry.

"OK. Not my business after all. Anyway, I'd better go, my friends'll be wondering where I've got to. Bye, Harry. I expect I'll see you at Hogwarts soon. If you end up in Slytherin, find me, I'll help you settle in. If not, I'm sure we'll see each other around, you can still ask me for help if you need it." Again, the smile.

Harry nodded gratefully. "Bye, Luella. Erm, just one thing. How do I get this thing to stop floating when I'm on the train?" He indicated the trunk.

"Point your wand at it and say *Finite Incantatem*. Easy enough. If you put some power into it. Really want that spell to end." She glanced up and saw Deanna waving at her, with Marlie and Rianne Stormosi, her other friend, watching with raised eyebrows. She turned back to Harry. "I'd better be going. Those three will be making

all sorts of sly comments if I stand around here much longer. See you at Hogwarts!" And with that, she hurried off towards her friends.

Deanna greeted her with the sort of amusement she'd come to expect.

"Who was that, then, Lu? Your secret toyboy?"

Luella rolled her eyes. "As if. Just some first year I ran into. Looked a bit lost, so I thought I'd talk to him. Nice kid."

"What's his name?" Marlie asked, watching the boy trail off towards the Weasleys.

"Harry. Muggle-born. Future Slyth, you reckon?"

"Not if he's going to get ingratiated with the Weasleys." Rianne commented.
"Gryffindors one and all, that lot."

Marlie sniffed. "Poor boy, having to put up with Fred and George in his house. Mind you, I should talk, my cousin starts this year. I bet he's in bloody Slytherin. What a pain in the arse, having to have him hanging around. I just hope he doesn't take after his parents, that's all I can say. Let's get on board, get a carriage to ourselves." With that, Marlie led the way onto the Hogwarts Express.

Harry Potter watched Luella go with surprise. She seemed nice enough. He cast his mind back to everything he'd heard about Slytherin House, that there wasn't a single Dark mage who hadn't been one. Hard to reconcile that image with Luella Martin. Someone less likely to be a Dark witch he'd be hard pressed to find. Compared with the only other Slytherin he'd ever met, Luella seemed positively heavenly. Mind you, that other Slytherin had killed his parents and tried to kill him, giving him the scar Luella had noticed. He rubbed it. Strange, that she hadn't appeared to recognise it. He'd been told it would mark him out as famous Harry Potter who defeated the evil Lord Voldemort. Yet the first witch to see it hadn't got a clue how he'd come by it. This, Harry thought, was a good thing. He decided he liked Luella. Maybe Slytherin House wasn't so bad after all. He still would rather not be one though. Dragging his trunk behind him, a job made much easier by Luella's Charm, he wandered off in search of an empty carriage.

Melissa Lovegood and Caitlin Tyler had by this time caught up with their offspring.

"Now you will take care won't you?" Mrs. Lovegood warned her children. "I don't want any owls saying you've been set upon by your fellow students again."

"Oh, as if!" Marlie grinned. "Come on, I'm the best Seeker Slytherin have had in years. They're not going to poison me again, are they?"

"I'd be more concerned about what these four might be up to next." Mrs. Tyler commented wryly. "Listen here, you four, if I hear that you've put so much as a toe out of line, there will be trouble. Especially you, Deanna."

Deanna feigned shock. "Mother! Are you accusing me of misbehaviour?"

"I'm not accusing you of anything. Just stating that if I hear about any crazy schemes or bizarre pranks that can be traced back to you, you will be seriously in for it, my girl."

"As if I'd do anything like that. Mum, you disappoint me."

Mrs. Tyler gave her daughter a knowing look. "Hmm. Well let's keep it that way, shall we? Alright, come and give your mother a kiss." Deanna did so, reluctantly.

With all the goodbyes out of the way, and everyone settled on board the train, the two mothers stepped back and walked away. After three times seeing their children off, neither felt the need to wave to them until the train left any more. Melissa in particular felt no real concern about any of them. They'll be fine, she told herself. They're quite capable of looking after themselves now.

She glanced at Caitlin, who was gazing up the platform. At the end of the train, the small boy who Luella had been talking to earlier was having his trunk heaved on board the train by two red-haired boys who could only be the Weasley twins. Caitlin watched them, a strange look in her eyes as she gazed at the first year.

"Caitlin." Melissa said gently. "Leave him."

Caitlin started at the mention of her own name. Her eyes did not leave the young Harry Potter though.

"Look at him, Mel." she said quietly. "So like James. And he's got his mother's eyes, did you notice that?" She held her head in her hands. "I miss them both so much, Mel."

Melissa comforted her friend. "I know, Caitlin. I know. But there's nothing you can do for Harry now. He's living with his aunt and uncle. Not your responsibility any more."

Caitlin shook her head fiercely. "He shouldn't be with them. I'm his godmother, he should have come to me. What was Dumbledore thinking of?" She turned to Melissa, furious. "You don't live in the same town, Mel! You've never crept near their house to spy on them! You've not seen the way they treat him. They make him do the chores, they made him sleep under the stairs, they spoil their own son rotten but never even bother celebrating Harry's birthday. Did you know they didn't even tell him about being a wizard until the Hogwarts letter came?" She was rocking backwards and forwards on her heels with fury. "The number of times I've thought of Apparating into their front room one evening and demanding to know what they think they're doing to him, I've lost count of. I dream of one day walking into their house and taking Harry away from them for good. He's my godson, Mel!" Caitlin's voice rose, fire in her eyes. "Lily was my best friend, my very best friend! She and James made me and..." She

paused, a look of pain shooting across her face. "They made me guardian if anything should happen to them." she said quietly. "He should have come to live with me."

Melissa gently hugged her friend. "Caitlin. You already had one young child to manage on your own. And you only just coped with that. You couldn't have managed Harry as well. And you're not his blood relative. The Sanguinis Charm couldn't have protected him with you. It's for the best that he lives with the Dursleys."

Caitlin was sceptical. "If you say so, Mel. But it's not right, the way they treat him. And you never really knew Petunia Evans. She was a jealous, spiteful child and she's not improved with age. She makes your sister look like Luella."

Melissa laughed hollowly. "I doubt that. Although I must say, she's got worse since marrying Lucius, and I do sometimes wonder..." She brushed her worries aside, before discreetly casting a Secrecy Charm around them so no one would be able to eavesdrop. "Never mind. Caitlin, we need to talk."

"What about?" Caitlin sighed. Melissa had assumed her Head of Department voice, so this was clearly about something other than the godson she'd been denied. However, she was proved wrong almost immediately.

"Harry, of course." Melissa said, a wry grin on her face. "Did you see him talking to Luella?"

"I did. Why?"

"Interesting that one who will defeat the Dark Lord and one who already has should meet up so soon and get on so well. And that they both grew up in the same town, went to the same school."

"What are you getting at, Mel?" Caitlin said, warily.

"The Redemption Prophecy, of course." Melissa lowered her voice. "Two Muggle-born Slytherins, born fifty years apart, a thousand years after Slytherin's downfall. One will expose our darkness for the world to see. The other will eradicate it and bring peace by defeating the older one. And she will be assisted by a Gryffindor wizard who is a child of Gryffindor and Slytherin. Think, Caitlin! We know who the two Slytherins are, but not the Gryffindor. At least, not until now." She smiled craftily.

Caitlin's eyes widened. "You don't mean...?"

"Of course. James Potter a Gryffindor, Lily Evans a Slytherin. And he's already brought down Voldemort once. Why not again? If it comes to that, of course."

"Jumping the gun a little, aren't you Mel? The boy hasn't even been Sorted yet. He might end up a Hufflepuff for all you know."

"The same was said of Luella. She ended up in the house we expected. And if Harry is anything like James, then he too will be a Gryffindor."

Caitlin sighed. Melissa was, in all probability, right. She'd observed Harry carefully growing up, and after all he'd suffered, to still be a nice, polite young boy, he couldn't really be anything but a Gryffindor.

"All right. So what do we do?" Caitlin was nothing if not practical. Melissa shrugged. "Us? Nothing. Let him get on with his life. Make friends, grow up, learn how to be a wizard. We do the same as we did with Luella, watch, protect, give him space to grow. And hope the two of them become allies in the future."

"And who's going to be doing the watching?" Caitlin asked hopefully.

"Not you, for a start. I'm sorry, Caitlin," Melissa said as Caitlin cried out in protest, "but you're too emotionally involved. He is well protected by the Sanguinis Charm with the Dursleys. And as for his time at school, I've asked Severus to keep an eye on him."

Caitlin protested even more at this. "Severus?? Mel, you can't be serious! He hated James. With a passion. Not quite as much as he hated Sirius, but still pretty badly. How on earth you expect him to give an impartial, fair account of Harry's progress is beyond me."

Melissa pretended surprise. "Caitlin! I thought you liked him. He certainly likes you."

Caitlin went red and swiftly changed the subject. "You leave me out of this. Severus and I are just friends, although if he mistreats my godson, that will change."

"What, you mean if he's horrible to Harry, you'll shag him? I'll tell him that, he will be pleased." Melissa grinned.

"Mel!" Caitlin nearly shrieked. "That's not what I meant."

"Oh, as if I'd tell him to mistreat Harry Potter, Caitlin." Melissa laughed. "But seriously. I think he's a good choice. He might not like Harry much. But he will do what's asked of him, and believe it or not, he is capable of being objective when he has to. Sometimes. If he's in a good mood. At least he will not spare me any less than pleasant details, although I may have to work hard to get anything nice out of him. Which is where you come in."

"I'm honoured." Caitlin said dryly. "And where do I fit into this?"

"Well, it is a well-documented fact that Severus Snape has something of a soft spot for you."

"And? I hope you're not expecting me to embark on a torrid affair with him. Deanna would not be happy." Caitlin looked disapproving.

"Relax." Melissa said casually. "I'm expecting nothing of the sort. Whether you sleep with him or not is entirely your choice. All I ask is that you meet up with him on occasion and ask him about Harry in person. Caitlin, if anyone can get an accurate answer on Harry's wellbeing out of him, it's you."

"How often is on occasion?" Caitlin asked warily.

"Not often. Once or twice a year. More often if a crisis erupts, obviously. Also, given the current situation with the Stone, it's a good idea for the two of you to work together in protecting Luella anyway. I doubt she's in any immediate danger, but I'm taking no chances. Keep each other informed and updated, alright?"

"Mel, do I have any choice in the matter at all?"

"Nope. As the two mages most responsible for Luella's wellbeing, I want you two communicating. You don't have to like him! Just be civil."

Caitlin sighed. Her last conversation with Severus Snape had ended in a heated argument verging on violence. But on the other hand, she had to admit she did want to see him again. And maybe if they concentrated just on professional matters...

"Go on then." she heard herself sighing. Melissa patted her on the back warmly.

"Excellent, I knew you'd see sense. Come on, let's get to the office. Carmela Lynch is reporting back on the Gringotts robbery. I want to know what we've managed to find out about it."

"Is it true that Voldemort may have been behind it?" Caitlin asked quietly.

"It's a possibility. Certainly my sources say he's not where we thought he was. I believe he may have recruited someone to assist him, maybe a former Death Eater. And let's face it, going for the only known Philosopher's Stone in existence would be a smart next move. Good thing we had it moved when we did."

"A good thing indeed." Caitlin went pale. "But Mel, it's been moved to the same place as Lu and Harry! What if they attempt a raid there! Why not take the opportunity to eliminate them as well?"

"All the more reason to keep watch on the place. Dumbledore has put good safeguards around the Stone, and I've no doubt he's watching Harry too. As for Lu, she's unknown as yet. They won't go for her. However, we need to make doubly sure that all is well there. Another reason for you to see Severus in person. I want to make sure that the situation is closely monitored. I very much doubt it will be an open attack, the Dark Lord is not that strong. I doubt Luella and Harry will come to any harm just yet. But I'm taking no chances. I want to know who's helping You-Know-Who." She looked grim.

Caitlin suddenly began to have a very bad feeling. "Mel, you said it might be a former Death Eater. You don't think it might be..."

"Severus?" Melissa laughed. "No, Caitlin, I don't think so. Not him. Rest assured, Caitlin, your boyfriend is quite innocent."

"Mel Lovegood, he is not my boyfriend!" Caitlin snapped. "We are just friends! And that is all."

"Whatever you say, Caitlin." Melissa smirked. The two witches continued to argue the point even as they Disappeared.

Chapter Two Duelling on the Hogwarts Express

Much later that day, the Hogwarts Express was travelling through the Scottish countryside, approaching its destination. Luella Martin was gazing out of the window. For someone used to the green fields of Surrey and the gentle, rolling hills that were the North Downs, the mountains of Scotland covered in an unending forest of pine trees with mist hiding their peaks were a sight that never failed to impress.

"So beautiful." Luella whispered. "I love Scotland, don't you, Deanna?"

"Nice enough. Bloody cold, though. I bet Wales is better."

"You moved to Surrey when you were three! How would you know?" Rianne snapped from the corner of the compartment. She was already going through one of her textbooks, twirling a strand of reddish-brown hair idly in her fingers. Rianne was a tall, thin girl with brown eyes, freckles and the sort of studious expression that made her look as if she should be wearing glasses (even though she didn't need them).

"Alright then, o Cymraegish one." Deanna said. "Is Wales better than Scotland?"

Rianne glanced lazily out of the window. "Tyler, you already know what I'm going to tell you. Of course Wales is better. Give me Yr Wyddfa any day. That's Snowdon to you two." she said, a slightly patronising expression on her face.

"I know what Yr Wyddfa is, you patronising Caernarfonshire git." Deanna snapped. Rianne snatched up her schoolbag.

"Oooh! Touchy! And I'm from Aberystwyth, not Caernarfon, get it right." she sneered at her. Deanna just snorted and returned to examining the view.

At that point, Marlie burst in with a repulsed look on her face. "Don't go out there!" she said dramatically. "You won't believe what Lee Jordan's got hold of!"

The other three looked at each other wearily. Lee Jordan was a friend of the infamous Weasley twins and as such, could have anything.

"Go on then. Tell us." Deanna sighed.

"He's only gone and got a giant bloody tarantula!" Marlie said, seething. "And those bloody Weasley twins were trying to set it on me!"

The girls grinned. "And what did you do to it?" Luella said. Marlie hated creepy-crawlies, but had got a lot braver about them since her Sleeping Death trance.

Marlie gave a sly grin. "Put it this way. You know spiders are supposed to have thirty three eyes? It's now got only thirty. I used the Conjunctivitis Curse on it."

Deanna grinned. "Cool! Are the Weasleys and Lee Jordan happy with you for that?"

"Er... they weren't pleased. Told me to watch out or they'd set the Slytherin Serpent on me. But never mind them. Have you heard the rumours flying around this train?"

They shook their heads. "What rumours?" Rianne asked.

Marlie sat down, with the attitude of one about to indulge in a good old fashioned gossip.

"We have a celebrity in our midst." she said slyly.

"What?" "You're joking!" "Who?"

"Harry Potter. The Boy Who Lived. Starting Hogwarts this year. He's on the train! With us! Isn't that cool?"

"Harry Potter!" gasped Deanna. "You're kidding! Where? Let's go and see him!" She got up and headed for the door.

"Wait a minute!" Rianne snapped. "Leave the poor boy alone. I'm sure he doesn't want the entire school trooping in like he's some kind of exhibit."

Luella looked confused. Harry Potter? The one who defeated Voldemort? Starting Hogwarts now?

"But how can he be at Hogwarts? He defeated Voldemort, he must be a grown man by now surely?" she said puzzled. The other three burst out laughing.

"Lu, don't you know the story?" Marlie laughed.

"Er... he defeated Voldemort ten years ago. That's all I know."

Rianne was looking at Deanna. "Don't tell me you didn't tell her! You're meant to be her best friend!"

"Yeah? And how often does Lord Voldemort crop up in your everyday conversations, Ri? Yeah, thought so." Deanna turned back to Luella. "Lu, he was only a baby at the time. That's why he's so special. Voldy turned up at his house, killed his parents, went for him, but it didn't work. Curse bounced off Harry, hit Voldy and he snuffed it. House reduced to ruins, Voldemort's followers scattered like flies, Voldy himself bit the dust, and little Harry Potter's left unscathed. Well, almost. He was left with a scar on his forehead shaped like a bolt of lightning. Got sent to live with Muggle relatives of his afterwards. He was only a year old at the time, poor kid. That was ten years ago, he's now eleven and starting Hogwarts. Wow, we're going to be at school with him! Reckon he'll end up in Slytherin?" Deanna seemed fascinated.

Luella wasn't paying attention. Her thoughts had raced back to the boy she'd met at King's Cross. With a lightning shaped scar on his forehead.

"Oh my god, that was Harry Potter?" she gasped. The other three turned to look at her.

"You met him?" Marlie asked, openmouthed.

Luella nodded. "Yeah. He was that first year kid I ran into. No wonder he was so shy and quiet! He must have been terrified I was going to mob him. And no wonder he wouldn't tell me how he got his scar."

Deanna wasn't listening. "You met Harry Potter? You actually MET Harry Potter? And you didn't get his autograph? Aaargh!" She seemed highly disappointed. Luella knew that Deanna loved hearing about tales of famous Aurors and other Dark Fighters. She must have heard Harry's story from a young age and been dying to meet him.

"Sorry." she mumbled. "I'd have asked him if I'd known."

"What's he like?" Marlie asked, fascinated. "Is he cute? Does he like blondes?"

"I don't know! I only spoke to him for five minutes. And Marlie, he's eleven. Not likely to be interested in girls yet."

Marlie got up, unruffled. "Well, I don't care. I'm going to see him for myself. I'm not passing up an opportunity to meet the world famous Harry Potter!"

"I'm coming with you!" Deanna said.

Rianne stared at them both. "You two! Leave the poor kid alone, he's probably had half the train trooping in to see him. He's probably had more than enough. Lu, tell them."

"Ri's right, leave him alone, I'm sure he doesn't want to be besieged by fans." Luella said.

Deanna and Marlie ignored them both and headed out. Rianne and Luella looked at each other, sighed and followed them.

Marlie led the way down the train towards the end compartment where Harry was rumoured to be. As they approached it, voices drifted out towards them. A rather posh sounding boy's voice was speaking.

"You'll soon find out some magical families are much better than others, Potter. You don't want to go making friends with the wrong sort. I can help you there." Luella was reminded suddenly of Narcissa Malfoy.

Harry's voice was heard in reply. "I think I can tell who the wrong sort are for myself, thanks."

The first boy's voice was heard speaking again, sounding a lot less friendly this time. No doubt about, he sounded just like Narcissa Malfoy.

"I'd be careful if I were you, Potter. Unless you're a bit politer you'll go the same way as your parents. They didn't know what was good for them either. You hang around with riff-raff like the Weasleys and that Hagrid and it'll rub off on you."

There was silence from the compartment. Deanna and Marlie looked at each other, nodded and drew their wands. Marlie kicked the door open and strode in.

"Greetings, children." she trilled. "Is it me, or do I detect a fight brewing? If so, please don't start without me, it's been ages since I had a good battle. Isn't it, DT?"

Deanna slinked in after her. "Too right, Marlie, I've been spoiling for a duel for a while now." Luella, standing behind them, peered over their shoulders.

There were five boys in the carriage. One was Harry, wand at the ready. Next to him was a red haired boy who looked like a taller, thinner version of the Weasley twins. Between those two and Deanna and Marlie were three other boys. In the middle was a slightly built blond boy who looked stunningly similar to Marlie. Luella realised with a shock that this must be her Malfoy cousin. Either side of him were two much bigger boys who also seemed familiar, although Luella couldn't think where she'd seen them.

The blond boy took in the four girls standing there in their Hogwarts robes. He glanced at the sashes and smiled.

"Ah, reinforcements. Fancy demonstrating what les Verts-et-Argents are capable of?"

"Don't tempt me." snarled Deanna. She looked contemptuously at his black sash. "And I'd thank you not to use that name until you're one of us. If you're one of us." she sneered at him.

"Of course I'll be one of you. I'm a Malfoy. Draco Malfoy." Draco had a strange expression on his face, a mixture of confusion and anger. Marlie made a strange noise that expressed anger and surprise. Coolly, she stepped forward.

"So you're my cousin Draco. I must say, I'd expected you to be taller. My brother was much bigger than you at that age. Obviously that inferior Malfoy blood interfering with the Harker genes."

Draco's expression turned to pure anger. "Size isn't everything. If you're one of my country bumpkin Lovegood cousins, then you've no right to criticise my genetic stock. At least my family isn't riddled with Muggle blood." He produced his wand threateningly. Deanna was ready.

"Don't threaten an Auror's child again, Malfoy. Not good for the old life-expectancy. Expelliarmus!" The wands of Draco Malfoy and his two friends went flying out of their hands. Marlie caught them. "Nice one, Tyler!" she laughed.

Draco and his friends went quiet at the mention of Deanna's surname. "Caitlin Tyler's daughter?" one said quietly.

"That's me." Deanna said carelessly. "Fastest draw in the school."

"We've heard about you." the other one said gruffly. "Lots about you. You want to watch yourself, you've got quite a few enemies out there."

"Thanks for the warning." Deanna said casually. "Now get out before I take you up on your offer to demonstrate real Slytherin power."

Draco motioned to his friends. The three of them slipped past the girls, pausing only to take their wands back. Luella watched them go nervously before stepping into the compartment after the others.

Marlie surveyed the other two boys. "Are you two alright?" They both nodded. Marlie turned her attention to the red haired boy.

"Sorry about him, Ron. That particular branch of our family should have been pruned a long time ago. I'm hoping he doesn't end up in Slytherin, but I fear it will be otherwise."

"You know him?" Deanna asked, mildly surprised.

"Ron Weasley." Marlie explained. "I don't think I need say any more." She turned to the other boy and went quiet.

"So you're Harry Potter." she said softly. "I must say, I'd thought you'd be, well, taller. Marlie Lovegood, by the way. Ron's neighbour. Third year. Slytherin Seeker. Unfortunately related to that trash Malfoy. This is Deanna Tyler, that's Rianne Stormosi and this is Luella Martin, but I gather you've already met her."

"Hi, Harry." Luella said, smiling. "You never told me you were Harry Potter!"

Harry blushed. "You never asked." he said quietly.

Deanna was studying him carefully, thinking hard. "I know you, don't I? I'm sure I've seen you before. Where are you from?"

"Little Whinging, Surrey." Harry said cautiously. "It's just outside..."

"...Kingston-upon-Thames?" Deanna grinned. "Know it well, mate. Grew up in that hell-hole myself. I mean, Kingston itself is alright, but the particular suburb I have to live in is the absolute pits. Only decent thing about it is a fast bus route into town. Such a dull little place, the motto on the coat of arms is "There's always Kingston". Wait a second, if you're from the same town as me and Luella, that must mean..."

Luella suddenly realised where she'd seen Harry before. "You went to our school! I recognise you! You were always getting picked on by that fat kid, what's his name?"

"Dudley Dursley. My cousin." Harry said.

Deanna snapped her fingers as it all came flooding back to her. "Gods, yes, Dudley Dursley, what a moron. Tried to pick on us too, except we were both faster than the fat pillock. And we fought back. Lu, do you remember that time he was trying to get our lunch money, and he suddenly ended up flying backwards into the long jump pit?"

Luella laughed. "Flew right across the playground, taking half the third year with him. Teachers never did work out how we'd managed it. My parents hit the roof. Vernon Dursley's one of my dad's clients, we nearly lost a lot of business because of that. Good thing you took the rap, really. Mind you, he didn't pick on us again, did he?"

Deanna shook her head laughing. Harry and Ron were grinning themselves, although Ron was trying to hide it. Marlie was trying to picture the thought of a fat kid careering across a crowded playground, while Rianne was trying to look disapproving, without success.

Deanna controlled her laughter and looked sadly at Harry. "Harry, can you ever forgive me?"

"What for?" Harry asked, surprised.

"Not recognising you!" Deanna said softly. "Great Mother, if I'd known you were Harry Potter! Why my mum never told me, I don't know. I even saw you in Kingston town centre once with your Muggle relatives and FBD. Mum was with me, and she kept looking at you really strangely, sort of like she was upset and angry and couldn't do anything. Now I know why. She knew who you were! Harry, I'm so sorry. If I'd known, I'd have befriended you, protected you from FBD, that sort of thing." Deanna said regretfully.

"FBD?" Ron, Marlie and Rianne asked in unison.

"Fat Bastard Dursley." Luella replied. "It was what we used to call him. Hey, it made us laugh."

Harry burst out laughing. The thought of his cousin being referred to as FBD behind his back was the funniest thing he'd heard in ages. All of a sudden, Dudley Dursley seemed far less terrifying. He recalled the time when Dudley had been flung across the playground. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia had been furious, particularly at the fact that a couple of girls had been responsible. Uncle Vernon had called them both common gypsy hoydens. Harry had thought at the time that he wouldn't mind being a gypsy if it meant being able to do that to his cousin. And it was these two sitting in front of him. He warmed to them even more now he knew that. He thought Luella had seemed familiar before. Now he knew why.

At that moment, a voice was heard announcing the imminent arrival of the train at Hogsmeade station. Rianne got up.

"Come on, you three, we'd better go. Make sure we've got everything. Harry, Ron, nice to meet you, I daresay we'll see you around. Maybe even in Slytherin."

The four Slytherins left the compartment, shouting goodbyes to Ron and Harry. Harry waved good bye, smiling to himself. Ron looked rather less impressed.

"Who were they trying to impress? We could have handled Malfoy by ourselves." Ron said indignantly.

"Yeah, but they know more magic than us." Harry pointed out. "Did you know how to get their wands off them like Deanna did?"

"That's not the point." Ron muttered darkly. "They're Slytherins."

"Seemed nice enough to me." Harry said calmly. "They saved us from getting beaten up, and they've sent my cousin Dudley flying across a crowded playground into a long jump pit. Pretty impressive."

"They're still Slytherins." Ron said obstinately. "And Marlie Lovegood's trouble. The amount of times she's landed Fred and George right in it. She's as manipulative as they come and she's Malfoy's cousin. Her only redeeming feature is that she's a Chudley Cannons fan. Don't trust her."

"We can't pick our relatives, Ron." Harry said absently. "Look what I've got for a cousin, he's almost as bad as Malfoy. And from what I've heard about your brothers, I doubt they needed any help from her to get themselves in trouble."

"Harry, are you listening to me?" Ron almost yelled. "They're Slytherins! The Enemy! You don't hang around with or get friendly with Slytherins, no matter how nice they seem. They are all devious, untrustworthy gits! Come on, we're here. Let's go. Forget about them. They might be Slytherins, but so will Malfoy be. You don't want to be in the same house as him, do you?" He got up and headed for the door. Harry followed, his head spinning. How could four girls like that have ended up in the evil house? It didn't make sense. And they'd gone after Malfoy, a potential future housemate. Slytherin was obviously a much more complex house than he'd first imagined. Ron did have one good point though. If it was Malfoy's likely destination, it probably wasn't a good place to be.

The four Slytherins picked their way through the throng of students on their way to the Slytherin table. The ceiling was now dark, and the stars glimmered down on them.

Deanna took a seat midway up the table, with Luella next to her. Marlie and Rianne settled opposite.

"Nice to be back, isn't it?" Rianne sighed. "I tell you, I've missed this place." She looked nostalgically around, her eyes sweeping across the teachers' table for the briefest of instants. The other three grinned at each other. It was an open secret that Rianne had something of a crush on their House Master and Potions teacher, Professor Snape. The man in question was seated next to Professor Quirrell, their Defence Against the Dark Arts who was wearing a large purple turban. Snape, wearing his usual black robes, looked as arrogant as he usually did. He swept his eyes

lazily across the Slytherin table. As his gaze travelled over the Slytherin girls, he paused briefly and gave them a half-smile before looking away again. Luella smiled. Events during their first year and their continued success for Slytherin ever since meant that Snape regarded them rather more highly than most of his other students. Certainly he was less vindictive towards them. Deanna in particular he seemed to like, much to Deanna's disgust. Deanna had little respect for any teachers but disliked Snape most of all.

Marlie's thoughts were on the forthcoming Sorting. "I wonder who we're going to get this year. I hope Malfoy and those thuggish mates of his don't end up in Slytherin. Fancy having that lot in our house. I'd rather be in Hufflepuff than in a house with those three."

"Not much chance of that - Mum reckons the Malfoys have been Slytherins for generations." Deanna said. "So have the Harkers, so he's Slyth on both sides. Sorry, Marlie."

Marlie groaned. Rianne comforted her. "Never mind, Marlie. How much trouble could he be? I mean, we're third years. He's just a firstie. You're our star Quidditch player. My older sister is favourite to be Head Girl this year, and your brother's tipped to be a Prefect. Come on, you'll be fine. We'll look after you."

"Thanks, Ri." Marlie smiled. "At least I'm immune to Sleeping Death now."

Luella found her eyes returning to the teachers' table again. Something wasn't quite right. For no reason, she felt profoundly uneasy. She glanced swiftly at Snape. He was talking to Professor Dumbledore. Nothing worrying there. She shot a glance at Professor Quirrell on Snape's other side.

The fear hit her suddenly. Clutching at her insides, pricking and poking at her brain. She seemed to hear a voice in her mind hissing Beware, beware at her, and a sense of a dark shadow somewhere behind her, just out of the corner of her eye, wanting nothing less than her heart, soul and very life. A dark power, draining her energy and her will slowly away towards itself...

"Luella? Lu? Are you OK?" Deanna was shaking her arm. Luella started. She looked at herself and realised she was sweating all over and trembling.

Deanna was looking at her in concern. "Lu, what is it? You look awful. Are you alright?"

Luella held herself, worried. "Did you feel that?"

"Feel what?"

"That... fear. I don't know what it was. Just seemed to come out of nowhere. Like there was this shadow just trying to drain me. God, it was horrible." She shivered nervously.

"Lu, it's alright." Deanna said soothingly. "You're safe. No one's going to attack you here, not with Dumbledore and all the teachers watching."

Luella shook her head. "I don't know. I just... don't feel safe. I mean, it's gone now, but I still feel like I'm being watched."

"Well, you're not." Deanna said firmly. "No one's looking at you, they're all looking at their watches and waiting for the Sorting to start. And talking of which..."

The lights in the Great Hall dimmed. Now only the table lamps gleamed in the darkness. A hush fell over the Hall as the doors opened and Professor McGonagall led the first years in.

Luella watched as they passed the Slytherin table. Draco was there, looking his usual arrogant self. Harry, in between Ron Weasley and another boy, looked petrified. Luella gave him a smile of encouragement but he didn't see her. She remembered her own Sorting. She too had been terrified, more so than most. After all, her eventual House would determine whether she'd have a quiet life or have to take on Lord Voldemort. Unluckily, she'd been landed with the destiny of fighting the Dark Lord. Not appealing, but so far, being Slytherin Redeemer had made very little appreciable difference to her life.

The first years lined up in front of the teachers' table and the Sorting began. Luella, however, paid little attention. She was still puzzling over why she'd suddenly felt so afraid. After all, what was there to be frightened of? Snape was there, Dumbledore was there, it was a familiar enough setting. So where had it come from? She looked back at Professor Quirrell, barely visible in the half-light. No fear this time, but a growing sense of unease. Something is not right, she thought, alarmed. Not right at all.

The rest of the school started applauding. Realising with a start that the Sorting Hat had finished its song, Luella hastily joined in. She settled herself expectantly as the Sorting proper began. Hufflepuff got the first few Sortees, but Bulstrode, Millicent became the first new Slytherin. Luella clapped politely enough but couldn't help thinking that she didn't look promising. A few more Sortings, then a name was read out that made all four girls' blood run cold. "Crabbe, Vincent!" McGonagall called out.

"Crabbe, did she say?" Rianne hissed. Luella watched with horror as one of Draco's friends stepped forward. Now she knew where she'd seen him before. His brother had once been a Hogwarts student, but had been expelled during their first year. And they'd had a hand in it. No wonder the younger Crabbe had been so interested in Deanna.

Deanna was pale with shock. "Oh gods, I didn't realise he'd have a brother." she whispered. "What do I do, folks? I bet that other mate of Malfoy's is Marcus Goyle's brother. They're going to hate me!"

"There's three of them and four of us. You're the best dueller in school and Lu's best at magic. And me and Ri have influential siblings. Don't worry." Marlie whispered.

Crabbe was duly sorted into Slytherin and sat at the far end of the table. He scanned the rows of students and soon picked out Deanna. She met his gaze coldly. He just grinned evilly at her and turned to watch the Sorting. More names were called, and "Goyle, Gregory" came all too quickly. He too ended up in Slytherin and joined his friend. He too gave Deanna the same evil grin. Deanna shuddered nervously.

Eventually "Malfoy, Draco" was called. The Hat wasted little time with him, screaming "Slytherin!" as soon as it touched his head. He swaggered over to Crabbe and Goyle, grinning smugly and shooting a nasty grin at Marlie and Deanna, who both shook their heads sorrowfully.

"Could it get much worse?" Deanna asked theatrically. "All I need now is for Clarissa Parkinson's younger sib to join us and that'll just put the icing on the cake!" Sure enough, Parkinson, Pansy was Sorted into Slytherin and sat with Millicent Bulstrode, not far from Draco. She gave Deanna a look of pure hatred then turned away. Deanna sighed.

"What goes around comes around, I guess. This is not going to be my year, is it?"

Rianne was philosophical. "Life's a bitch, Deanna, and all good things must be paid for. I guess this is your karma for being such a hero during your first year."

"Tell me about it." Deanna muttered darkly. Marlie motioned for quiet.

"Never mind them! It's Harry Potter's turn!"

They fell silent. McGonagall called out "Potter, Harry!" All down the hall, whispers broke out. On her other side, Luella heard Summer Montague whispering to Laetitia Vetinari "What, the Harry Potter? Really?" and Laetitia replying "Do your maths, Summer! He's eleven this year, isn't he?"

Luella watched Harry walk to the Hat. Poor thing, he looks awful, she thought. She watched with bated breath as he sat down and pulled the Hat on. Seconds ticked by. The air was alive with tension. Suddenly, the Hat sang out "Gryffindor!".

The Gryffindor table erupted with applause. Harry took the Hat off, his face flushed with pride. He walked off towards them, shaking, but happy, and allowed his fellow Gryffindors to mob him.

Luella felt a wave of disappointment. She liked young Harry. And now he was a Gryffindor and rival. Ah well. Not the end of the world. Just disappointing. She'd been looking forward to helping him settle in.

The Slytherin table seemed rather flat, as all around, people were muttering about how Potter should have been theirs. Laetitia was heard exclaiming "Well, if he's a Gryffindor, then so be it. But I think it's such a waste for one so talented not to end up here." Summer and Kat Stormosi were concurring.

The Sorting was nearly at an end now. Ron Weasley was Sorted into Gryffindor, as expected, and Blaise Zabini wound up in Slytherin, before the lights came back on,

and the Hat was taken away for another year. Now came the next ceremony of the evening as the new Prefects and Head Students were announced.

Each House Head took it in turn to read out the names of the new Prefects from their house. Gryffindor were first, and Luella noted that Percy Weasley was among those presented with a Prefect badge. Bet Fred and George'll love that, she grinned. Percy was known to be a stickler for rules, completely the opposite of his fun-loving younger brothers.

Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff were next, then it was Slytherin's turn. Luella felt the entire table go still and quiet as Professor Snape read out the names. Most she didn't really know that well, but she felt a thrill of excitement go through her as Mike Lovegood was among those called out. Across the table, Marlie bounced up and down, shouting "Go, Mikey!" Luella smiled. Having another friend with a Prefect as older sibling was a good thing no matter how you looked at it. Especially when said older sibling was known to be very protective of his sister's wellbeing. She glanced at Deanna, who was also grinning.

"See that, Lu!" she hissed with delight. "Malfoy won't dare to pick on us with Mike around!"

Laetitia Vetinari was also picked as a Prefect, to no one's surprise, and Snape returned to the teachers' table. The Hall went dim again, and Professor Dumbledore got to his feet. He produced a chest and opened it in silence to reveal a goblet, blazing with magical fire. The Headmaster began to speak.

"Ever since the Founding, this ceremony was performed at the opening of each session to choose from among the student body those most suited to leading it that year. To ensure that the choice is made impartially, we use this magical artefact, the Goblet of Fire. The names of all our seventh year Prefects are placed in it, and it chooses from among them the boy and girl best fit to lead you. It is nearly ready to make it's choice, I believe."

Everyone waited in silence. This ceremony was, if anything, more daunting than the Sorting. At length, the Goblet threw out a piece of parchment. Dumbledore caught it expertly and read out the name of a stunned Hufflepuff boy who had to be prodded by his friends into going up to collect his badge. Now it was the Head Girl's turn. The room went quiet. Time seemed to stand still on the Slytherin table. Debra Stormosi was tipped to be favourite, but would the Goblet agree?

The Goblet shot out it's answer. Dumbledore caught it and cleared his throat. "From Slytherin House, Debra Stormosi."

The Slytherins cheered. Kat was clearly seen hugging Mike and screaming "That's my sister!" Rianne was doing likewise to Marlie. Up and down the table, Slytherins were giving Debra a standing ovation as she went to collect her badge from Dumbledore. Luella shot a look at Professor Snape who seemed pretty pleased. Next to her, Deanna's grin had just got even bigger.

"Well, this year at least, we're set! Marlie's brother a Prefect, Rianne's sister Head Girl. Lu, this is brilliant!" Deanna smiled. "Ah, Malfoy, you'll have your work cut out for you getting revenge on me now!"

Luella grinned as the feast got underway. True, they'd missed out on Harry Potter, and got landed with Draco Malfoy. But on the other hand, they now had influence in all the right places. And for a Slytherin, that was just about perfect.

Chapter Three Desire Unfulfilled

Caitlin waited nervously in the Three Broomsticks, toying with her wine glass. Her first meeting with Severus in over a year. She wasn't at all sure how this was going to go. She just hoped they didn't end up threatening each other like the last time.

The door was flung open, causing quite a few customers to look up. However, on seeing who had just walked in, in a foul mood even by his standards, they returned to their drinks muttering "Oh. It's him." While Snape did not make a habit of visiting Hogsmeade, his reputation had preceded him. Storming over to the bar, he ordered a double brandy, knocked it back in one, ordered another and scanned the room.

Caitlin allowed a look of wry amusement to cross her face. Severus looked less than happy. This could be an interesting meeting. However, she liked her men and her assignments challenging. Snape's expression lightened a little as he joined her.

"Well, thank Hades I'm seeing you today, Caitlin." he snapped. "Your owl was the only good thing to happen this week."

"I'm sure that's not true, Sevi." she countered. "Haven't we got ourselves a Slytherin Head Girl, after all?"

"Deanna told you all about that, did she?" Snape said carelessly. "Well, really, who didn't think Debra was going to be chosen? That badge has been waiting for her since she started Hogwarts. That is far outweighed by the new student intake."

Caitlin steadied herself for a Severus Snape rant. "Are you referring to our little superstar Harry?" she grinned.

"Who else? I tell you, Caitlin..." He took a sip of his drink and a few deep breaths to calm himself. "Have you seen him?"

"Briefly, at King's Cross. Why?"

Snape gazed at Caitlin, his eyes betraying anger, pain and fear. "He's so like him, Caitlin. So like Potter Senior. But his eyes..." He took another sip. "I made eye contact with him at the feast. It was like looking straight into the past. He's got her eyes, Caitlin!" He buried his face in his hands. "How the hell am I going to teach him when every time I see him, I'm reminded of her? And him! The eyes of the woman I loved looking out of the face of... of Potter! Then there's that scar." He lowered his hands and stared hopelessly at Caitlin. "A living, breathing reminder that I couldn't save them. I did all I could but he still found them. He still found them."

Caitlin placed her own hands over his to comfort him. "Ssh. It's alright, Sevi. It's in the past now. And it wasn't your fault they got found. You didn't betray them. It wasn't you who turned traitor." Her voice sounded harsh and her face lost all trace of warmth. Snape noticed the fury in her eyes, and comforted her in turn.

"Cait, leave it. He's in Azkaban now. Where he belongs. They're avenged at least."

She shook her head. "Knowing that won't bring them back, will it?" she snarled. She dropped her eyes. "Every day, Severus, every single day, I find myself thinking things like, I wonder what Lily's going to think of this, or I wonder if Lily's doing anything tonight. Then I have to remember she's not here anymore, I'm never going to have her over for a drink or pick her brains for ideas ever again. Because she's dead. Because Lord Voldemort murdered her!" Her voice rose to a piercing shriek. No one noticed her. Evidently, Anti-Eavesdropping Charms were protecting this particular table, for which Snape was profoundly grateful. Caitlin was drying her eyes.

"It doesn't go away, Severus." she whispered. "It doesn't ever go away. It hurts a little less over time, but it never really goes away. Mel's a good friend to me, so are you, but you're not Lily, either of you. I'm sorry, but there it is."

Snape held her hands in silence. Caitlin broke away to wipe away the tears that were running freely down her cheeks. She smiled ruefully.

"I'm sorry, Sevi. You came here to talk about how you were feeling and get treated to this. I'm surprised you're still here. You can leave me to drown my sorrows if you want."

"I'm not leaving you." Snape said quietly. He forced a smile. "I'm used to it now. Our meetings always seem to involve you crying or screaming at some stage. At least this time it's not over me."

"For once." Caitlin laughed. She recalled why she was there in the first place. "So how's he settling in, anyway?"

"Not bad. He's in Gryffindor. Friends with the newest Weasley to grace Hogwarts."

Caitlin caught her breath and stared at Snape. "Gryffindor?"

"Gryffindor." They looked at each other, identical thoughts occurring to each.

"Then it is him." Caitlin said softly.

"It would appear so." Snape said shortly.

Caitlin played with her wine glass. She smiled wryly at him. "Is Mel ever wrong? She amazes even me sometimes."

Snape snorted. "Hardly Advanced Transfiguration to work out that James Potter's son who is so like him in every other respect would end up in the same house, is it now?"

"She has spoken to you then."

"Of course. Not long after the Gringotts robbery. I am to report back to her on Harry Potter's progress as well. Melissa cannot bear to miss out on what our celebrity hero gets up to next. I think I'll turn it into a cartoon strip, make into one of those action comics. What do you think?"

Caitlin burst out laughing. "Sevi! Be serious. Mel just wants to make sure he's doing all right. Besides, given the current situation, you can hardly blame her for being cautious. What do you know about this Gringotts robbery then?"

"As much as you, if not more. I take it that it was the Philosopher's Stone they were after?"

"It appears so. We've no leads on who it might have been though. At least it should be safe at Hogwarts."

Snape looked doubtful. "Maybe, maybe not. Not all members of the Hogwarts staff team are pure as the driven snow. I have my suspicions about a certain Defence Against the Dark Arts professor."

"Samael Quirrell?" Caitlin laughed. "He's scared of his own shadow! Surely he's not working for Voldemort!"

"Who can say? But it's interesting that the year the Redeemer starts Hogwarts, one of her friends falls victim to a deadly potion. And that he was the one who gave the perpetrators the encouragement to actually brew it as a practical experiment."

"Severus, no one else knows who she is." Caitlin said quietly.

"Exactly. They'd narrowed it down to that particular group of four but weren't sure which it was. So they took a chance on it being a known half-blood. Caitlin," Snape said urgently, "he sets off every alarm bell I have. I don't trust him. And this year in particular, the signals are worse than usual. Plus I know for a fact he was in Diagon Alley the day of the robbery. It's him, I know it, I just need proof!"

"Does Mel know all this?" Caitlin asked.

"Of course. But she doesn't have enough evidence to act. Nor, for that matter, do I. But I do intend to keep an eye on him. I don't think he will go for Luella, after all he does know I'm on to him and only a fool would deliberately arouse my over-protective father instincts. Potter could be in danger though, and he's so much more publicly known. Which means I now have to spend the entire year protecting a boy I can't stand who is the son of a man I always hated, all because of some ancient prophecy and the fact that his mother was a friend of mine and my sense of honour obliges me to make up for not saving his parents!" Snape was fuming.

"Sevi, it wasn't your fault." Caitlin said gently. "No one survived once Voldemort decided to kill them. No one except Harry."

"And you. You made it." said Snape. Caitlin's expression changed from consoling to cold in an instant. Snape hastily changed the subject. "Hey, guess who else starts this year. Lucius Malfoy's boy, Draco. He's in Slytherin."

"Unsurprising." Caitlin said icily. "All his ancestors have been Slytherin for generations on both sides. Your point being?"

"Well, I feel rather sorry for the boy. His home life is somewhat less than satisfactory, I gather."

Caitlin laughed derisively. "With Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy as parents? You don't say! Narcissa's 100 per cent bitch and Lucius is worse. Do you know what she as good as called me last week at King's Cross?"

Snape looked uncomfortable. "While I admit that Lucius deserves every abuse you can throw at him, do give Narcissa a break. She's not as bad as you think."

"How would you know? Friends from the 'old days' were you?" said Caitlin scathingly.

"Not exactly. But I know some of her secrets and that counts for a lot."

"Secrets, eh?" Caitlin's interest was aroused. "Do tell!"

"No." said Snape firmly. "I promised her I'd keep quiet. But while there's little I can do for her, I do feel obliged to keep an eye on young Draco. Try and make sure he doesn't turn out like his father."

"Looks like you've got a busy year ahead of you then, doesn't it?" Caitlin observed. "Protecting the Stone, keeping an eye on Luella, watching out for Harry and keeping tabs on Quirrell, then trying to keep Draco Malfoy on the straight and narrow as a side project. I do hope Mel is paying you for all this!" Caitlin grinned.

"Now I won't say all this isn't a nice little earner. Not much Snape family savings left, thanks to my dear departed father's penchant for the bottle." he said sarcastically.

"Yes, I'm now on the DDAE's unofficial payroll. Again. I don't know what it is about me, Caitlin, that makes the Ministry top brass take one look at me and think "secret agent", do you? Hardly James Bond, am I?"

Caitlin couldn't help laughing. "Oh, I don't know. I can just see you in a tux. We could call you Double-Oh-Sevi." She dodged the playful blow Snape aimed at her arm with ease.

"Watch it, Tyler." said Snape casually. He looked at her suddenly and smiled.

"What?" Caitlin asked defensively. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"No reason. I'm just remembering all the times you and I used to meet up in pubs much like this one and just spend ages talking. It's getting rather like old times, don't you think?"

Caitlin's smile faded as she too started remembering. "Not that similar, Sevi." she said sadly. She turned abruptly away.

"Caitlin..." Snape said gently, reaching out to brush a stray lock of hair away from her face. Caitlin shrank back from his touch.

"Severus, no. Don't go there. Just don't. I don't want to hear about the past, I don't want to know about the past." Snape opened his mouth to respond but Caitlin cut him short. "Severus, if you and I are going to start socialising again, we need to have some ground rules. First, this stays focused firmly on the present. Don't talk about the past. I want to forget the past. I want to put it behind me. And secondly, don't touch me, don't call me Cait, don't use any terms of endearment for me. I know how you feel about me, but I would rather keep this on a friendship basis. I don't want to get hurt again. Do you understand me, Severus?" Her eyes bored into his.

"Perfectly, Caitlin." Snape replied, a hard edge to his voice. "I just hope you know what you're doing, that's all. You must know by now that playing with me is like playing with fire."

"Well, if we keep our distances, we won't get burned, will we?" Caitlin said coldly. She got up to leave. Snape regarded her with a look of amusement.

"Do you fear me, Caitlin?"

Caitlin froze. She didn't answer immediately. When she did, there was something not quite genuine in her voice.

"Don't be stupid, of course not."

"Well then, you should. Because I'm still dangerous, and just because I've changed sides doesn't mean my inner nature's any different. Take care, Caitlin. Even my self-control has it's limits."

Caitlin turned to look at him, a steely look in her eyes. "So has mine. You're dealing with an Auror here, Severus, and the notoriously psychotic Caitlin Tyler at that. You know what my colleagues call me when they think I can't hear them? The Killing Machine. Caitlin the Cold-blooded, that's me. You think you're dangerous? You have no idea what the years have done to me. There's very little love or kindness left in these veins, and what little there is, Deanna and Luella get. None left for you, Severus. So watch yourself, because you're as vulnerable as I am."

"So why are you the one on the run?" Snape asked softly.

Caitlin bristled. "Who said I'm running?"

"You're about to walk out on me again. Leave, rather than face the truth."

"And that would be?" asked Caitlin icily.

A less brave or foolhardy man would have shut up instantly from the look Caitlin was giving him. However, Severus Snape was not so easily put off.

"That you're in love with me. Still in love with me, after all these years."

Caitlin breathed in, furious. Without even blinking, she reached back and dealt Snape a hard backhander across the face. Snape clutched his jaw in pain and looked back at her in wounded silence.

"Never, ever, say that again." hissed Caitlin. "Ever!" She took a few deep breaths and regained her self-control. "I think," she said coldly, "that it is high time we cut this conversation short. Severus, I daresay we'll be seeing each other soon to discuss the current situation at Hogwarts. Until then, I must bid you adieu. Goodbye, Severus."

Snape inclined his head in the briefest of nods as she left. Downing the rest of his brandy, he allowed a smile to cross his lips. Caitlin had reacted exactly the way he'd hoped.

Snape returned to Hogwarts feeling rather better than he had when he left. True, the prospect of teaching Harry Potter still did not appeal, but talking to Caitlin Tyler had a way of lifting his spirits. Even if their conversations did end up with him get routinely assaulted. No doubt about it, Caitlin was a challenge. However, her reaction had proved one thing - her feelings for him hadn't died. There was hope yet. And if the only caresses that he could get from her were violent slaps around the face, then so be it. Rather any emotion than none at all.

He entered the Hogwarts staff room to find his fellow teachers gathered around something bright and shiny in the corner.

Much like the ravens he'd always kept as pets, Snape couldn't resist shiny things. Caitlin and Lily had frequently remarked that if it hadn't been for his fear of heights, he'd have made a good Seeker. Snape had always felt that they might be right. However, he was more concerned with what his colleagues were interested in now.

It turned out to be a large mirror, with an intricately carved golden frame, and the words *Erised stra ehre oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi* carved across the top. Professor Flitwick was looking into it.

"Well, George? What do you see?" Professor Vector, the Arithmancy teacher, was saying.

"Flourish and Blott's are stocking my new book on Charms!" he squeaked. "And Charms teachers the world over are coming to buy it, it's been so highly recommended!"

Snape peered over his shoulder. Nothing was visible except Flitwick's reflection. He approached Professor McGonagall.

"And what might that be, Minerva?" he asked, trying not to sound too curious.

"The Mirror of Erised." she said absently. "Shows your heart's desire. Apparently Albus needs it for something, but not just yet. So we've got the dubious pleasure of having it here. Pointless waste of time, if you ask me, we've all got work to do." McGonagall sounded most disapproving.

Snape examined the mirror more closely. It didn't show him anything, but maybe you had to be right in front of it to see into it. Professor Kettleburn, the Care of Magical Creatures teacher was now having a go.

"I can see... I can see a unicorn! A tame unicorn, here at Hogwarts! Oh, how beautiful!" He sounded like he was about to weep. Professor Flitwick turned and noticed Snape standing there.

"Severus!" he smiled. "Come and have a look at this! You won't believe what we're all seeing in it. Come on, come and find out what your heart's desire is!"

Snape protested, but found himself dragged to the mirror regardless. Face to face with it at last, he gazed into its depths and saw...

Saw himself standing outside a small cottage. But he wasn't alone. He had his arm around an attractive witch whose features were all too familiar, and she was laughing and smiling up at him. A flash of light shone off her left hand and Snape realised she was wearing a wedding ring. A glance at his own hand confirmed that he was wearing one too. But what really tore at his heart strings was the child standing in front of them. A child with the same dark eyes as him, shining with happiness, and dressed in not dissimilar black robes.

Snape forced himself to look back at his own reflection again. His double was smiling back at him, his eyes brimming with pride in his wife and child. Snape couldn't take any more.

"Severus! What's wrong? What did you see?" Flitwick called after him, bewildered. The Potions teacher had turned abruptly and walked out, hiding his eyes. He appeared deaf to the calls of the other teachers.

"What's up with him now?" Professor Sprout sighed. Professor Flitwick shrugged.

"Gods know. Severus Snape is the touchiest wizard I know. Leave him. Right, who's next?"

Later that night, when everyone else was asleep, Snape stole quietly away to the staff room again. The mirror was still there, propped against the wall. After checking to see that the room was deserted, Snape walked quickly over to it and gazed into it again.

They were still there. The three of them, arms round each other, smiling blissfully. Snape felt it tear at his heart again. Yet he couldn't stop looking this time. Just

couldn't tear his eyes away from his beautiful young wife. Or, for that matter, from the child he never thought he'd have, staring back at him with eyes she could only have inherited from him. My daughter, he thought painfully. That's what my daughter looks like. What's she like, what is she good at, what does she do with her spare time? He had visions of sitting by the fire with her, telling her stories of times gone by, or playing chess with her, going out for walks with her and calling the birds out of the sky so she could learn their names and how to talk to them. He felt the pain tear at him again. I can live without a wife if I have to, Snape thought, but I've never wanted anything more than a child of my own!

"Which one is it, Severus? Is it Lily or Caitlin?" a voice came from behind him. Snape spun round.

Standing behind him, leaning against a table, was Albus Dumbledore.

"You! But how... When did you come in?" Snape was shaking with shock and fury that his private moment had been interrupted.

"I've been waiting for you for some time. Minerva told me about what happened earlier. I wondered when you'd come back."

Snape almost snarled back. "What concern is it if I have? My heart's desire is nothing to do with you!"

Dumbledore didn't seem to mind Snape's attitude. "Oh, I wouldn't dream of prying. But you reacted extremely badly to seeing it earlier, and it's clearly had an effect on you. I wondered which of the two it was, the one you couldn't save, or the one you saved but couldn't heal."

Snape felt the fire go out of him. The pain was almost choking him. "My child." he said softly. "I saw my child. I saw myself as a father." His eyes filled with pain and hurt as he met Dumbledore's gaze. Dumbledore's expression changed to one of surprise mixed with pity. He said nothing, just let the younger wizard continue.

"She had my eyes, my hair, even a similar dress sense. She was really pretty, really innocent. And I can't get it out of my mind how she could be as a person, how we'd get on together. All the little father-daughter things we'd get up to. Could it ever happen, Albus?" Snape felt a fierce, desperate longing burning inside him.

"Who knows, Severus? As Minerva never fails to remind me, Divination is a most imprecise branch of magic. I will, however, tell you this. You are young, you've time on your side. And while one witch is dead, another lives. And she may yet forgive you."

"She can't bear to be in the same room as me for long. Not the stuff happy marriages are made of." Snape said dryly. "And it hurts me just being near her."

Dumbledore smiled. "See? You have much in common. Patience, Severus. Give it time. You two both have a lot of wounds to heal. It won't happen overnight. Don't lose hope. You and Caitlin Tyler were always very close friends at Hogwarts. She was

virtually the only one who could bring you out of yourself. She gave you healing without even knowing she was doing it. I think you can do the same for her, if given the opportunity. I think she will let you, when she's ready. Don't lose hope, Severus."

Snape stared glumly at the floor. "When will that be, when I'm in my hundreds and have forgotten how to go about fathering anything?" he snapped. Dumbledore smiled at him.

"You underestimate yourself, as usual. And her. The bond between you is strong indeed, to have lasted this long and under such pressure. I think it will take less time than you think. However, in the meantime, I must ask you one thing."

"Ask it."

"Not to come looking for the Mirror of Erised again."

Snape gasped in horror. "Professor, please. I need to see them both, I have to. It's my deepest desire, all I've ever wanted. Please!"

Dumbledore was sympathetic but firm. "I'm sorry, Severus, but stronger men than you have gone mad looking at this mirror. You've only seen it twice and look how it's affected you. You cannot live your life in dreams, Severus. I know you want to see your family, but you would be better off searching for them in the real world than wasting away here. I need the Mirror anyway, it cannot remain here. Severus, I'm sorry, but I cannot let you see it again."

Snape nodded miserably. Turning to face the Mirror again, he gazed straight into his daughter's eyes.

"One day, child." he whispered. "One day." He turned back to Dumbledore, barely managing to tear his eyes away from it. "There. I'm done. Happy now?" Leaving the Mirror behind him, he pushed past the Headmaster and returned to his room.

That night, Snape dreamt. He was following his daughter up a mountain trail. "Are we there yet, Dad?" she called back to him.

"Just a little further, dear." he called to her. Finally they reached a clifftop with a single barren tree.

"Now, child. Watch this." Snape called quietly in the language of birds. A raven soared towards them and settled on his outstretched arm. The girl looked on, impressed.

"See, child? A gift that runs in our family. Each one who has the gift can talk to any bird, but they'll always have a speciality. Mine is ravens and crows. Call like this. And your own bird will find you." He showed her how to summon her totem bird. The girl called. From far away, a peregrine falcon came in answer to her summons and settled on her shoulder.

"Ahh. A worthy bird indeed. You are fortunate indeed, my daughter." Snape said proudly.

The girl turned to face him. Seeing her face clearly for the first time, he gasped. It was Deanna Tyler.

"Daughter?" she laughed, and Snape was stunned to see how adult she actually looked. "No daughter of yours. I'd rather have Voldemort for a father than you!"

Snape felt his heart break as she laughed in his face and turned away. A figure approached out of the gathering darkness and Deanna went straight to him, reaching out to embrace him. It was none other than the Dark Lord himself. And with him, crying and looking like she'd been beaten up, was Caitlin, being dragged by the wrist.

"Help me, Severus!" she cried.

"Let her go!" Snape snarled at Voldemort.

Voldemort just laughed. "I'll let her go if you come back to me, Severus. I'll even enchant these two, so that they fall in love with you. You can have that happy family you've always wanted. I can make her worship at your feet." He indicated Caitlin, now on her knees.

"Never!" hissed Snape. "I was a fool to join you in the first place. I'll never go back to you!"

Voldemort shrugged. "Suit yourself. I never liked her anyway." He flung Caitlin to the floor and pointed his wand at her. "Avada Kedavra!"

The green light flashed, and Snape buried his face in his hands, unable to watch. Slowly, he lifted them, terrified of what he might see.

He was no longer on the clifftop. Now he was in the ruins of what had clearly been a mage cottage. Somewhere, a child was crying, but Snape wasn't paying attention. He sifted through the ruins, not wanting to but unable to stop himself. At length he found her. Lying there, green eyes staring into space, face transfixed in fear, her beautiful reddish-brown hair spread out around her, was his first love, Lily Potter nee Evans. And she was dead.

Snape woke up screaming. As he realised where he was, he sank wearily back. "Just a dream, just a dream." he whispered. He lay there for a while before getting up and going to his potions cabinet. He always kept a supply of Sleeping Potion here, for occasions like this. Dreamless sleep guaranteed. This wasn't the first time he'd relived that night after all. Drinking the potion, he returned to bed, sleep already beginning to claim him again. But as he fell asleep, the last thing he saw was Lily Potter's sightless eyes accusing him...

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Chapter Four Unexpected Alliances

Luella and Deanna both looked up with a shock as Marlie stormed into the Serpent's Nest after Quidditch training and threw her Cleansweep down furiously.

Rianne glanced up from her Charms homework. "Something the matter, Marlie?" she enquired.

"You will never believe what's just happened!" she screamed at them. "They've no right to, absolutely no right to at all!"

"No right to what?" Deanna asked.

"No right to put him on their team!" Marlie snapped.

"Who's that, Marlie?" Luella asked, rapidly losing interest. Quidditch was all right, but nothing like as much to worry about as Deanna and Marlie seemed to think it was.

"Who do you think? Golden Boy! Everyone's favourite superstar! Mr. bloody Wonderful!"

Luella and Deanna looked over at Draco. "They've not put Draco Malfoy on the team, have they?" Deanna asked in disbelief.

Marlie shook her head. "Not our team! The bloody Gryffindors! Guess who their new Seeker is?"

"Bloody hell, Marlie, how would we know?" Deanna asked. "I haven't got a clue who the Gryffindors have got that's any good."

"Harry bloody Potter!" Marlie screeched. "Harry I-defeated-the-Dark-Lord-aren't-I-wonderful Potter!"

"Harry?" gasped Luella. "But he's only a first year! How??"

"I don't know." Marlie snapped, flinging herself into a chair. "But apparently they're bending the rules for him. Bloody hell, folks, just because he's a bleeding celebrity, on to the team he goes."

Luella doubted this very much. "But Marlie, he's not that type. I mean, he's no Malfoy, is he? He didn't ask to be famous, and I'm sure he wouldn't exploit it just to get on the Quidditch team. Anyway, look who's talking! Very similar things were said when you got picked, don't you remember?"

"I do, if you don't." Rianne pointedly reminded her. "And I think that you, of all people, have no right to complain about them playing a first year Seeker."

"Suppose." Marlie sulked. "Doesn't mean I have to like the idea though." She got up and headed for their dorm to retrieve her Transfiguration homework.

"Guess we'd better make a start on that Potions assignment." Deanna sighed. "Don't want to get on Snape's bad side, do we?"

"Haven't you done that yet?" Rianne asked in surprise. "I've already finished it."

"You would." Deanna muttered. "Well, those of us less in love with Professor Snape are still working on it. Lu, have you got that textbook out of the library yet?"

Luella groaned. "No. Damn. I'll have to go and get it now before the library closes."

"Well, hurry up. Can't do the work without it. Although, seeing as it's Snape... Actually, take your time, mate." Deanna grinned as Luella headed out into the corridor.

Luella browsed through the shelves slowly. Somewhere in here, surely... At last, she found the book she was looking for, grabbed it off the shelves and headed for the Loans desk.

She was brought up short, however, by an unexpected sound. Was that... someone crying? Luella crept quietly in the direction of the noise and found herself in a quiet corner of the library. Sitting alone at a table was a girl with lots of bushy brown hair wearing Gryffindor colours. It was she who had been crying. Her arms were folded on the table and she'd buried her face in her hands.

Luella felt her heart go out to the poor girl. There but for the whim of fate... She was forcibly reminded of herself not so many years ago, friendless and picked on, apart from Deanna. She went over to her and sat down.

"Er... are you all right?" she said softly. The crying girl looked up startled and blushed scarlet.

"Oh! I didn't hear you there. Yeah, yeah I'm fine." The girl hastily dried her eyes. Luella wasn't fooled, not after hanging around Deanna for the last ten years.

"You don't look it. What's up?" she said gently.

The girl gulped. "Nothing. It's just that..." She burst into tears again. "I've been so looking forward to coming to Hogwarts and now I'm here, it's horrible!"

Luella tried to comfort her, reaching in her pockets for some tissues. "Hey, it's all right. What's happened? Is it the work or your housemates?"

The girl laughed bitterly. "I'm top of every class. Everything comes so easily to me. It's my housemates. I've tried to be nice, tried to be friendly, but no one likes me! You should hear the things they say about me behind my back, it's horrible. Especially that Ron Weasley. He keeps saying what a nightmare I am. It's not fair, I've tried to be good at things and get points for Gryffindor, and no one cares! Everyone hates me!"

She dissolved into helpless crying. Luella gave her a hug and dried the other girl's eyes.

"Hey. It'll be OK. You're a smart girl, someone must like you. Maybe you want to hang around with Ravenclaws, they always like the intelligent people. You're a Gryffindor, aren't you? What's your name?"

"Hermione Granger." the girl sniffed. "What's yours?"

"Luella Martin. Third year. Muggle-born Slytherin, but don't hold that against me."

"I'm Muggle-born too." Hermione Granger said quietly. "I was so surprised when I got the letter telling me I was a witch. Mind you, it explained a lot. My parents were amazed too. They're really proud of me. I haven't told them about how I'm feeling, I don't want to let them down. But I don't know if I can take much more of this!"

Luella soothed her. "Hey. At least your parents were pleased. Mine wouldn't let me go at first until the witch living across the road talked them round. They're really pleased now though, they can tell all their friends that their daughter goes to an exclusive Scottish boarding school."

Hermione started. "You had a witch living across the road from you?"

"Oh yes. She's my best friend Deanna's mother. She's an Auror, Caitlin Tyler."

Hermione's jaw dropped. "Caitlin Tyler? *The* Caitlin Tyler? The one who caught the notorious Death Eaters Rosier and Wilkes? The one who brought in Crouch Jr. and the Lestranges after they tortured the Longbottoms? The one who caught the vampire terrorising Yorkshire in the summer of 1986? And who's second-in-command to Melissa Lovegood herself? Caitlin Tyler, officially the most dangerous and feared Auror at the DDAE? That Caitlin Tyler?"

"Er... possibly." Luella said hastily, realising she knew very little about what Deanna's mother actually did for a living.

"But she's one of the most famous Aurors around! She's in *Recent Dark Arts Defeats* and everything! Dark mages have been known to turn themselves in on hearing that she's on their case! Everyone's terrified of her. And you know her? What's she like?"

"She's nice. Friendly. Bit scary though sometimes. She's always been good to me. Always been glad to have me round and talk to me when things have been getting me down. I didn't know she was a witch until I came here, of course, but I always suspected something." Luella wasn't sure what to say. She was still having difficulty with someone hero-worshipping Mrs. Tyler, who was as familiar to her as breathing.

"Wow, you know Caitlin Tyler!" Hermione was very impressed. She leaned closer. "Can you get me her autograph?"

Luella grinned. "If you want. I don't think she's in the habit of giving out signed photos, but I'm sure she won't mind. In fact, while you're asking, I may as well tell you I also know Melissa Lovegood as well. One of my other friends is her daughter."

Hermione nearly fell off her chair. "Melissa Lovegood! She's my role model! First ever female Department Head, possible future Minister of Magic, arrested so many dangerous criminals. She is so intelligent! So cunning! So brave! Can I have hers too?"

Luella grinned. "Go on then, I'll ask Marlie for you. It'll probably have to be cleared for security gods know how many times by who knows how many people, so it could take a while, but I'll see. Anyone else you want? I can sort out Alfredo Stormosi too if you're interested."

Hermione shook her head. "I'm not really into Quidditch. I'd far rather find out about famous Aurors and Anti-Dark Arts fighters. Their exploits are so much more relevant, and you can learn so much! I've been reading all sorts about them, it's so exciting! I want to be an Auror one day, it sounds like the best job ever."

Luella raised an eyebrow. "Is that so? I should introduce you to my friend Deanna. She's into all that too. I think you'd like her."

They were interrupted by Madam Pince announcing that the library would be closing in five minutes. Luella got up to get her book checked out.

"I'd better go, I need this for my Potions assignment and I'm not risking Snape's wrath, even if I am one of his favourite pupils."

Hermione followed her, surprised. "You're one of Snape's favourites? How?" "Well, it helps being Slytherin. It helps being consistently brilliant at his subject. It helps being..." Luella suddenly stopped herself. How could she be so foolish? She'd almost revealed her secret to this young Gryffindor. "Doesn't matter." she said quickly. "Anyway, he seems to like me. Gods know how."

Hermione did not press the point. "Well, they do say he favours Slytherin. I don't think he's so bad, but he does pick on Neville Longbottom a lot. And Harry Potter. And Ron Weasley, but Ron brings it on himself most of the time." she said disapprovingly. Luella grinned. Sounded like Ron took after his brothers all right.

They left the library and prepared to go their own separate ways. Hermione lingered for a while, clearly unwilling to go back to the Gryffindor common room.

"You will get me those autographs, won't you?" she said anxiously. Luella smiled.

"Of course I will. You have my word as a Slytherin. And Hermione, listen." She lowered her voice. "If you ever feel upset again, come find me. Send me an owl or something, and we can meet up, have a chat about things. How's that?"

Hermione looked pathetically grateful. "Thanks. You've been really kind. Not at all like everyone says Slytherins are." She immediately clapped her hands to her mouth, shocked at what she'd just said. Luella smiled.

"Relax, Hermione. I know what everyone else says about us. I mean, I know Fred and George Weasley, for a start. I'm used to it. For what it's worth, in a lot of cases, they're absolutely right. Anyway, if you ever need me, owl me. Or even if you don't, owl me anyway. It'd be nice to talk to someone different for a change. Not that I don't like my friends, but I do spend ninety percent of my time with them after all."

"OK, I will." Hermione nodded. "See you soon, Luella!"

"See you soon, Hermione." And with that, the two girls parted, Hermione Granger in a much better mood than she had been before.

Deanna burst out laughing when Luella told her what had happened.

"She wants what? My mum's autograph?"

"So?" Luella said, feeling strangely hurt. "Your mum's quite a famous Auror, you know! She's got fans to satisfy. Oh, Hermione wants Mrs. Lovegood's autograph too. Marlie, can you arrange that?"

Marlie raised an eyebrow. "Someone wants my mother's autograph? Why?"

"She's her role model. Stop looking at me like that! They're not for me, they're for this first year I met in the library."

"Oh. Right. Firsties. That explains everything. All right, I'll write home and ask her. Ri, can I borrow Barney?" Marlie asked lazily.

"Go on then." Rianne said, now working on her History of Magic essay.

Deanna still seemed unable to comprehend why anyone would want her mother's autograph. "I mean, I'll ask her, but I'm still not sure why anyone would want a signed photo of my mum."

"I'm amazed you have to ask that, you who swallows past exploits of Aurors for breakfast. You who keeps Burke and O'Reilly, that 500-page tome on how to defeat Dark mages, as a little light bedtime reading." Luella said, rather pointedly.

"Yeah, I know, but they're all dead. They're not my mum." Deanna shifted uncomfortably, before getting out her quill. "So how do you spell Hermione anyway?"

The days passed uneventfully, and it was soon time for the first major event of the year - the Halloween Feast. The four Slytherins were anticipating the feast with glee.

"I love Halloween!" Marlie was saying enthusiastically. "So much cool food, not to mention the opportunity for a good party. Shame they won't let us go trick or treating the other houses."

"Good thing too." Rianne said disapprovingly. "Can you imagine what sort of thing the Weasleys would get up to? They're quite bad enough as it is, the last thing we want to do is actually give them the opportunity to play pranks."

All four of them contemplated this for a minute. The thought did not appeal.

"No, you're right, Ri, that's a really bad idea." Marlie said hastily. "Forget I said anything. Come on, let's get a move on, get some good seats for the feast."

They were interrupted by someone pushing past them, and running off in the direction of the dungeons.

"Hey!" Deanna yelled. "Watch where you're going!" The figure did not reply, just kept running. Luella recognised the scarlet and gold of Gryffindor and that bushy hair immediately. She also recognised the sound of sobbing. It was Hermione.

"I'd better go after her." sighed Luella. "She sounded pretty upset to me."

"You'll miss the feast!" Marlie gasped.

"I'll turn up for the end." Luella promised.

"Miss the main course just for some little Gryffindor first year?" Deanna raised an eyebrow. "Are you sure?"

"I happen to like her." Luella said, a little put out. "Anyway, she's got no one else and I promised her I'd look out for her. See you guys later. Save me a seat, won't you?" And with that, she raced after Hermione.

The other three watched her go.

"Are you sure she's a Slytherin?" Marlie asked Deanna.

"She's always been like that." Deanna sighed. "Big softy. Too nice for her own good. Come on, let's leave her to do her Good Samaritan bit." She led the way to the Great Hall.

Luella tracked Hermione to the girls' toilets just inside the dungeon entrance. Two other Gryffindor girls were in there, shouting to Hermione who had locked herself in a cubicle.

"Come on Hermione, you'll miss the feast!" one shouted.

"I don't care!" a muffled voice came from behind the toilet door. "I don't want to go anyway. Leave me alone!"

The other girl turned to her friend. "No use arguing, Lavender, if she wants to be like that, leave her."

The first girl nodded. "Guess so Parvati. Hermione? We're going now. We'll save you a seat if you change your mind."

Hermione didn't respond. The girls shrugged and left. Luella walked over to the door and knocked quietly.

"Go away, Lavender!" Hermione shouted. "I told you to leave me alone!"

"It's me, Luella." Luella said uncertainly. "They've gone now. Hermione, are you all right? You sound awful."

The door opened. Hermione Granger peeked out from behind it, her pretty face streaked with tears. Luella did a double-take. Hermione looked really upset.

"Oh, Luella!" she sobbed, bursting into tears. "I'm so unhappy! Everyone hates me! I thought they did before, but now I know they do! I heard Ron Weasley telling his friend Harry how horrible I was!"

Luella got some paper towels out of the dispenser and soothed Hermione as best as she could. This looked like it was going to take a while.

Deanna, Marlie and Rianne were busily helping themselves to the first course at the feast.

"Well, I don't know where Lu's got to," Marlie said as she munched her way through a prawn cocktail, "but she's missing a treat. Deanna, pass me some tortilla chips."

"Tortilla chips? With prawn cocktail? Marlie, you are seriously sick. I hope you're not planning on having salsa and guacamole with those." Deanna said, but she passed them to her anyway.

The proceedings were interrupted by the sudden entrance of Professor Quirrell, turban askew. He raced to Dumbledore's chair and gasped, "Troll - in the dungeons - thought you ought to know." before collapsing to the floor.

Chaos erupted as students began screaming and panicking. Dumbledore let out a few firecrackers from his wand to bring silence and instructed the Prefects to lead students back to their common rooms immediately.

Debra leapt to her feet and began shouting instructions at the Slytherins. "Come on, you lot." she snapped. "Back to the Nest. All of you! That includes you, Malfoy." Draco looked fed up. Evidently he'd been hoping to get a look at the troll for himself, for Debra had caught him trying to sneak away unobserved.

The three Slytherins followed the rest of their house out of the room. As they left, Deanna suddenly froze and turned to Rianne, horrified.

"Lu!" she gasped.

Rianne raised an eyebrow. "Tyler, you're losing it. I'm Rianne, remember?"

"Don't be an idiot." Deanna snapped. "I mean, what about Luella? She doesn't know about the troll, suppose she runs into it! We've got to go and find her!"

Rianne's face went pale, but she had the presence of mind to grab Deanna's arm.

"Go after it ourselves? Are you mad? Have you seen the size of the average mountain troll? No, we've got to find Professor Snape and tell him. Come on!" She pushed her way through to the teachers' table and caught Snape's arm as he was leaving.

Snape glared at them. "What on earth are you three doing? Get back to the common room immediately. You heard Dumbledore!"

"Sir, it's Luella!" Rianne gasped. "She's out there in the school and doesn't know about the troll. Suppose she runs into it? You've got to help find her!"

Snape froze, paralysed with shock. He recovered quickly.

"Where did you last see her?" he said.

"She was heading for the dungeons. One of her friends was upset about something and she was going after them to cheer them up." Marlie said, her lip trembling.

Snape seemed to relax a little. "Then she's probably back at the common room with them now."

"She won't be!" Deanna snapped. "The friend in question was a Gryffindor!"

"A Gryffindor?" Snape said, somewhat confused. He shrugged, brushing it off. "All right. Whatever. Listen, you three get back to the common room and STAY THERE! No heroic attempts to take on the troll yourselves. Especially you, Miss Tyler. I'll try and find her." And with that, he was gone, rushing over to find Professor McGonagall.

Deanna watched him go furiously. "And how's he going to know where to look?" she snapped. "I'm going to go find her."

Rianne and Marlie caught her again and frogmarched her after the rest of the Slytherins.

"No way." Rianne said firmly. "You heard him. You are coming back with us and you are staying there. Luella and Hermione are the best witches in their years; if anyone can hold off a full-grown troll until help arrives it's them. Come on!" Deanna complained at this, but was in no position to argue with both her friends, so allowed herself to be dragged off to the Serpents' Nest.

Luella and Hermione were still in the girls' toilets, seated against the wall, crouched on the floor. Hermione was no longer crying, but was still pretty miserable.

"What am I going to do, Lu?" she whispered. "Ron's right, I've got no friends here! All the other girls think I'm a snobbish goody-two shoes just because I care about my work and I'm not interested in boys or make-up or girly things."

"Deanna's not really into any of that either. Or me, for that matter! Don't let them get to you, kid." Luella said quietly. "Nothing wrong with wanting to excel. You wait, ten years from now, you'll be climbing the ladders of success at the Ministry while they're all having kids."

"Very Slytherin." Hermione remarked acidly. "But that doesn't help me now!"

"No." admitted Luella. "But it might help you get by if you've that to look forward to. Who cares if they don't like you? I like you. And I'm sure there's others who like you too. You're a cool person, Hermione. Really!"

Hermione nodded weakly. She was about to respond, when the most awful stench reached their noses.

"What on earth is that?" Luella gasped, pulling her robes across her face. Hermione looked equally blank. They both heard something shuffling in, and the door slamming shut. Luella felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end, and reached for her wand.

Something stumbled around the corner and into view. Hermione screamed. Luella shot to her feet, the blood draining from her face. Although she'd never seen one, she'd paid enough attention in Defence Against the Dark Arts to recognise a troll when it stumbled into view.

"Oh my god." Hermione was whimpering. "Oh my god, Luella, what is it?"

"It's a troll." Luella said quietly. "Get up and get your wand, quick. We're going to have to fight it."

Hermione staggered to her feet and produced her wand. Luella was pleased to see that the young Gryffindor wasn't panicking completely. She shielded the young witch and raised her wand as the troll advanced on them, knocking sinks off the wall and growling furiously, its club raised.

Luella waved her wand and used the first spell that came to mind. "*Expelliarmus!*" The troll's club flew out of its hand and crashed to the floor. The troll looked stupidly at its empty hand then roared even louder.

"Deanna's favourite tactic that." Luella said ruefully. "Unfortunately, Deanna doesn't normally take on opponents that are twelve foot tall with big muscles and angry. Run!" She pulled Hermione out of the way as the troll's fist smashed into the wall where they'd been standing. Sobbing, Hermione staggered after Luella as the two girls ran past the troll and headed for the door.

The door flew open as Harry Potter and Ron Weasley burst in, wands in hand.

"Are you two all right?" Harry gasped.

"Apart from having to deal with a full-grown mountain troll, yeah!" Luella snapped, as she dodged the troll's blows, Hermione clambering after her. "Don't just stand there, help us!" She dived to the floor and rolled out of the way as the troll aimed another punch at them. Hermione, pulled down by Luella, sprawled over the floor and wept. The troll, instinctively sensing which of the two girls was more vulnerable, reached out to grab her.

Ron was first to react. Throwing a tap at the troll, he shouted "Oi! Leave them alone, ugly!" The troll heard the yell and turned to face the two boys. Harry immediately took a step backwards. Ron seized the opportunity to run to Hermione's side and help her up. Luella, on Hermione's other side, gave him a hand peeling the terrified girl off the floor. The three of them looked horrified at Harry, who was now cornered. The troll was advancing on him, growling mercilessly.

"What do we do?" Luella said helplessly. The young boy looked scared out of his wits. Ron looked around and noticed the troll's abandoned club. He ran over to it and tried to lift it. It slid out of his hands with a crash.

"Too heavy!" he said frantically.

"Of course it is, you'll need a Levitation Charm to lift that!" Luella snapped.

"A Levitation Charm!?" he moaned. "I'm rubbish at them!"

"Then you'd better improve bloody quickly, hadn't you?" Luella said tersely. Ron just looked blankly at her. Luella sighed and raised her own wand. "*Wingardium Leviosa!*"

The club's handle lifted into the air first and then the entire club. However, it wobbled far too much for comfort and Luella realised how heavy it actually was. It was taking all her power just to keep it in the air, never mind lift it.

"Help... me!" she gasped. Ron pointed his wand at it and cast his own Charm. It immediately stabilised and Luella relaxed a little. However, even with two of them, it was still difficult to control.

Next to them, Hermione seemed to unfreeze and come to life. A third Charm joined theirs and the three of them managed to guide the club so it was hanging just over the troll's head.

The troll had almost reached Harry now. He was pinned against the wall, wand in hand, a look of grim determination on his face. His eyes registered the club hovering over the troll's head and he shifted as far away as he could.

Luella glanced at Ron and Hermione, who seemed to be nearing the end of their power. "Ready? On the count of three, drop it. One, two, three."

They released the club. It plummeted out of the air and smashed straight into the troll's skull. Harry saw the troll go cross-eyed, pause, then without moving a muscle, fall crashing to the ground.

The four children looked at each other, all breathing deeply. Hermione broke the silence.

"Is it dead?" she whispered, her voice quiet and trembling.

Harry was kneeling next to the troll. "I don't think so, I think it's just knocked out." he said, examining it carefully.

Ron was staring at Hermione. "Are you OK?" he asked nervously. "You looked awful back then."

Hermione nodded weakly. "Thanks to you three." she whispered. "Some Gryffindor I am! I wouldn't have had that Levitation Charm idea! I was too scared to move!"

Luella blushed a little. "Well, it was Harry who inspired me. Seeing Ron trying to lift that club reminded me of Harry trying to drag that trunk of his at King's Cross. I used one then too."

Ron glared at Luella and opened his mouth to say something unpleasant, but he never got the chance. The door flew open again and Professors McGonagall, Snape and Quirrell burst in. Quirrell took one look at the troll and had to sit down, clutching his heart. Snape wasted no time but strode straight over to Luella, who felt her heart sinking. Her House Master did not look pleased.

"Luella Martin!" he shouted at her, his eyes blazing. "What on earth do you think you are doing, wandering around the school like this when there's a troll loose? Trying to play the hero, were you? Thought you'd come to the rescue, did you?" His eyes swept around the room and fell on Harry. "Ah yes." he said softly. "Harry Potter. I might have known. Leading my Slytherins astray as usual, I see." He turned to Professor McGonagall. "Shall I let you deal with these three? I need to get this one back to her common room before she gets into any more trouble. Her little clique are notorious for attracting it. Come, Miss Martin." He seized Luella by the arm and hauled her out. Luella sighed, and smiled at Hermione, who looked more terrified of Snape than she had done of the troll. Winking at her, she mouthed "Don't worry. I'll be fine." before Snape dragged her out into the corridor.

Harry and Ron made their way back to Gryffindor Tower, relieved that was all over.

"Harry, I don't ever want to face one of those things again. I don't care how many points we get given." Ron said fervently.

"Certainly not if all we're going to get is ten between us." Harry agreed.

"Five, you mean. After she's taken five off Hermione." Hermione, to everyone's surprise, not least her own, had covered for them both by claiming they were trying to help her after she'd gone to hunt down the troll herself. "Then there's the five she gave Luella, who's Slytherin, so after all that, we're no better off than before!" Ron looked fed up.

Harry pictured Luella, being hauled out of the room by a Professor Snape more livid than he'd ever seen him. "I hope she's all right." he said nervously. "I don't envy her at the moment."

Ron seemed unconcerned. "I wouldn't worry. From what I've heard, she gets more marks than Hermione does, plus she's in Slytherin. Snape's not going to be too hard on her, is he? Worse that'll happen is she gets a detention and loses Slytherin a bundle of points, which is good news for us. Come on, the rest of that feast's waiting for us."

Snape dragged Luella out into the corridor and around the corner, out of earshot of the toilets. Only then did he stop walking and release her. He turned to stare at her, his eyes flashing with rage.

"Well, Miss Martin?" he said softly. "I'm waiting for an explanation."

Luella gulped. She knew far better than to lie to him. Not after what happened last time she'd tried to get one over the Potions master.

"I'm sorry, sir." she said quietly. "I saw Hermione rushing off towards the toilets looking upset, so I went after her to see what was wrong. We talked for a bit, then that troll came barging in. I used a Disarming Charm to get rid of its club then we dodged around the room trying to get away. Harry and Ron came in at that point, I think they were looking for Hermione. Harry distracted it and it went after him. Ron tried to lift the troll's club to knock it out but it was too heavy, so the three of us, him, Hermione and me, Levitated it and dropped it on the troll's head. You came in just after that."

Luella glanced up nervously. She couldn't swear to it, but Snape's anger seemed to have subsided a little and he looked almost impressed.

"So you were not actually seeking the troll out then." Snape said, sounding rather more calm.

Luella shook her head. "No, I was checking up on Hermione. She's a friend of mine and she's been having a rough time of it lately. I wanted to make sure she was all right."

"Very noble of you." Snape said dryly. He regarded her carefully. Luella couldn't even begin to read the emotions she saw there. "However, you were very lucky there. I don't want you taking risks like that in future. You are only thirteen and not that powerful yet. I do not want you getting the idea that you are invulnerable and plunging straight into whatever reckless adventure that Miss Tyler dreams up next. You are far too important to lose. Do you understand me?" His eyes burned intensely into hers.

Luella felt her own anger beginning to rise. "I understand you, Professor," she said bitterly. "You're saving me for Voldemort to finish off, aren't you?"

Snape's eyes bulged in stunned surprise. He recovered his composure and gazed at her shrewdly.

"So Caitlin has told you, then."

"Of course she told me." Luella said, meeting his gaze steadily. "She thought I had a right to know the truth. Question is, who told you?"

"Come now, Luella, I'm your House Master. It's my job to know these things. Let's just say I'm under orders to keep a benevolent eye on you."

"It's whose orders they are that's troubling me." Luella said darkly.

A hint of sadness crept into Snape's eyes. "Do you have any faith in me? I went out of my way to save your friend Miss Lovegood in your first year."

"Which nearly resulted in my best friend's death along the way." Luella commented tartly. "And don't tell me you were acting out of altruism. I heard Mrs. Lovegood threatening to expose all your dark secrets to the world if Marlie didn't make it. Don't even bother denying it."

Snape went ashen. Luella immediately wished she hadn't said that. Snape looked murderously angry. However, he restrained himself.

"Just get back to your common room." he said sharply. "The feast will be continuing there." He turned on his heel and left Luella standing there, a sense of foreboding hanging over her.

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Chapter Five Dangerous Revelations

Luella was greeted at breakfast the next day by Hermione, who rushed straight over to her, with Harry and Ron in tow.

"Luella!" she gasped. "Are you alright?"

Behind Luella, Deanna grinned and ushered Marlie and Rianne off so they could talk. Luella smiled at the first year.

"I'm fine. Snape gave me a verbal tongue-lashing, which was far from pleasant, but I was able to convince him I'd just been in the wrong place at the wrong time. How are you three?"

"OK." Harry said. "Hermione told McGonagall she'd gone after the troll to take it on herself, so we're in the clear. She lost five points, but me and Ron got five each for rescuing her. You got five as well. I told her you'd tried to stop us, but insisted on coming when that didn't work."

"Ah." Luella said. "I told Snape that I'd been comforting Hermione after she ran off crying and the troll burst in on us. Which has the virtue of being true. Let's hope they don't confer at any point, because I have no idea how to wriggle out of it if they do." She turned Hermione. "How are you feeling now? Better?"

Hermione nodded brightly. "I'm fine now. I just wanted to see how you were and say thank you for helping me out last night. We couldn't have done it without you, could we?"

Harry shook his head and smiled gratefully. Ron just glared, muttering something about not needing help from Slytherins, thank you. Hermione looked pointedly at him. Luella decided to ignore him, turning back to Hermione.

"So I take it you three are mates now?" she said, smiling. Hermione nodded, beaming. Luella grinned and turned to Harry.

"Well, in that case, I probably won't have to go rushing off after her again with the old Kleenex, but all the same... You two look after her and be nice, OK? If I find Hermione all alone and friendless again, I shall be hunting you both down with Deanna in tow. Got that?"

"We'll look after her." Harry promised.

"Good. Then I'll let you enjoy your breakfasts. See you guys later." The three Gryffindors returned to their table, Harry and Hermione bickering with Ron. Luella grinned and sat down with Deanna. Hermione seemed happy enough. One less thing to worry about. Luella glanced up at the teachers' table and swiftly looked away again. Snape was watching her most carefully and must surely have seen them talking. She recalled their previous night's conversation with a shudder. So Snape did know about her and clearly had done for some time. Question was, could he be trusted? The evidence either way was inconclusive. On the one hand, he did have a past with dark

secrets. On the other, he was apparently protecting her. Deanna's description of his reaction to her disappearance last night, Snape's reaction on finding her, and the hurt in his eyes when he'd realised she didn't trust him were not the actions of someone who cared little for her. On the contrary, she'd been reminded strongly of how her own parents would have acted. Snape never, ever raised his voice when disciplining students; he never needed to. Sarcasm was usually enough. He'd not used sarcasm last night.

Caitlin Tyler looked up with a shock as Snape limped into the Three Broomsticks. His letter had been short and to the point, merely asking her to meet him that evening. Judging from the look on his face and the pronounced limp that hadn't been there before, all was not well.

"Severus!" she gasped. "Are you alright? Sit down, let me get you a drink. What happened to your leg?"

Snape accepted the shot glass from her brusquely. He lost no time getting to the point. "Caitlin, what exactly have you told Luella about me?? She seems to think I'm the next Lord Voldemort!"

"I can promise you I've said no such thing." Caitlin retorted. "In fact, I distinctly remember telling her you were trustworthy. What happened, Severus?"

"Someone let a troll into the school on Halloween. Quirrell staggered into the feast, claiming there was one loose in the dungeons and passed out. We eventually tracked it down to the girls' toilets just inside the dungeon entrance, where it had been knocked out with its own club."

"Knocked out with its own club?" Caitlin repeated in sceptical disbelief. "Severus, not even a troll is that stupid."

"You are, of course, right. Four students had got there first and Levitated the club onto the troll's head."

Caitlin groaned. She could guess only too well which four students those had been.

"What has she done this time?" she said, wearily. "Have you told Mel, Alfredo and the Martins yet?"

Snape smiled. "No need. Only one Slytherin was involved, the rest were all Gryffindors. Rest assured your own daughter was safe in her common room the whole time. No, the students in question were Luella, and three Gryffindor first years. Namely Ronald Weasley, Harry Potter and a Muggle-born by the name of Hermione Granger."

Caitlin immediately sprang to attention. "Harry and Luella!" she gasped. "Are they alright? They could have been killed!"

"They're fine. Mercifully. It is, however, interesting that the troll happened to find them. I am told that Luella had gone after Miss Granger who was upset about something, and the boys were looking for them to warn them about the troll. Anyway, Minerva, Quirrell and myself were next on the scene, after the troll had been immobilised. Quirrell proved no help at all, collapsing with fear at the sight of the troll. I took Luella out of there and left Minerva to deal with the other three. I ascertained from Luella what had happened, and warned her about the dangers of thinking she was invulnerable because she'd been lucky enough to escape a troll. That is when I discovered she was aware of her destiny. She seemed to think I was fattening her up like a lamb to the slaughter, some kind of sacrifice to the Dark Lord. It would appear that she thinks I'm working for Voldemort." He looked reproachfully at her. "Why did you not tell her I could be trusted?"

"Why didn't you tell her you were working for Mel?" Caitlin snapped.

Snape shrugged. "Couldn't tell you. Probably the same reason you neglected to inform me that she knew already. Does anyone trust me at all?"

"Mel trusts you." Caitlin said. "So do I, for that matter. And Luella knows you helped save Marlie."

"Yes, and she also knows that Melissa virtually blackmailed me into doing it. Earning her trust now is going to be difficult if not impossible. And for a while back in the first year, I thought I'd managed it. Maybe she was just feeling guilty. She was in trouble at the time after all."

"Luella Martin, in trouble? Whatever for?" Caitlin said, a little surprised.

"Did Melissa tell you about the Stormosi Incident? I did spend more time than I really needed to talking it over with her."

"Oh, that. Yes, it was mentioned. Luella was involved then?"

"Gained access to the Restricted Section under false pretences, and found out about Branwen. Then told Rianne."

"Ouch."

"Yes, ouch. Easily one of the more stressful weeks of my life. However, back to the present. Seeing as Luella likes you, how about you write to her and reassure her that I'm trustworthy? I can't do my job properly if Luella thinks I'm Evil Incarnate."

"OK, I'll see what I can do." Caitlin promised. "Now, back to this troll. How did it get into the school in the first place? There are no trolls in this area, and there's magic keeping them out even if there were. So who let it in and why? And why are you now limping?"

"Now we come to the interesting bit, my dear." Snape said, leaning closer. "You've clearly been dying to find out about this limp of mine all evening, and I'm now going

to tell you." Caitlin leaned forward in anticipation. Snape smiled grimly and continued.

"Now, as you so rightly suggested, that troll did not find its way in there on its own. It immediately came to my mind that whoever had let the troll in had done so in order to create a diversion while they went in search of what we both know is being safeguarded in Hogwarts at this very moment. With that in mind, I went directly to the hiding place in order to head them off."

"And? Who was it?"

"I arrived before them, luckily. Opened the door, went in, came face to face with that accursed guard dog of Hagrid's. Nearly got my leg bitten off until a few well-placed fire charms persuaded it to let me go. Anyway, I abandoned any idea of investigating further and left with as much haste as I could. Locking the door behind me, I decided to keep watch and see who arrived. And who do I run into but our dear friend Samael, who appeared to have recovered himself unusually quickly."

"Quirrell!" Caitlin gasped. "Tell me more..."

"Well, he claimed to be there for the same reason I was, trying to see if anyone had gone after the Stone. Needless to say, I was suspicious, but had no proof to confront him with. Nor did I have the chance to question him further, as we were interrupted by the sound of crashing, banging, shouting and other noises generally associated with a fight. Making sure Quirrell came with me, I went off to investigate, met up with Minerva, and the three of us walked in on an unconscious troll and four rather shocked students. I believe you know the rest."

Caitlin looked thoughtful. "It looks suspicious, I must say. But there's still nothing to pin on Quirrell. He could have just been trying to see if the Stone's OK. Damn, this is frustrating!" She slammed the table angrily.

"There's more. I've taken the liberty of doing a little research into Quirrell's background, and it would seem that one of his areas of expertise is trolls. Seems he can control them magically. So he's more than capable of letting one into the school. Given this, it is also odd that having discovered one, he runs in fright, lets everyone know in the most dramatic way possible and collapses. Almost as if he were aiming at creating maximum chaos. And when he sees the troll knocked out, he nearly faints again. As if he's shocked that his troll's been taken out by some students, none of whom are more than thirteen. Suspicious doesn't even begin to sum up the situation." Snape said, his eyes blazing coldly.

"Still all circumstantial evidence though." Caitlin sighed. "We need proof, Sevi! And my talented daughter has given me inspiration. Here, I've got you this." She produced a package for him. Snape unwrapped it curiously and laughed to see the contents.

"I didn't think I'd be seeing this again. Miss Lovegood's Walkmage, isn't it?"

"A copy of it, yes. We've had Marlie and Leonard Lovegood producing them for our use. Marlie's been given special permission to use magic for the purpose of

constructing them over the holidays. We've got about ten of them now, they're very useful little things. Anyway, Mel has asked that you have one. We need a taped confession out of him. Somehow, you'll have to gain his trust. Pretend you want to help him steal the Stone. If he admits it and you can tape it, we have him."

Snape slipped the Walkmage into his pocket. "Isn't this unethical?"

"Not as long as you don't trick him or force him into saying something he wouldn't otherwise have said. The laws of evidence don't take Walkmages into account yet anyway, so we're quite safe. Besides, you were quite willing to accept it as evidence two years ago!" She gave him a penetrating stare.

"True, true, but my reputation isn't on the line now, is it?"

"Sevi, there'll be a lot more than just your reputation at stake if Quirrell gets that Stone. Particularly if Mel's theory about a possible Voldemort connection is true."

"Alright, point taken. I can't say I'm that concerned about Quirrell anyway."

"Good. How is your leg now anyway? Have you had Madam Pomfrey take a look at it yet?"

"No. I'd really rather not have to explain to her how it got in that state. Quirrell might find out. Filch is assisting with treating it; he's my cousin and owes me a few favours. He'll keep quiet if he knows what's good for him. I've brewed myself up some healing and painkilling potions, and the bandages have got Anti-Infection Charms on them. I'll survive, although I'll probably be scarred for life."

Caitlin looked concerned. "Severus! That wound's really serious, you should get it seen to! Damn secrecy! And you a mediwizard too!"

"Ex-mediwizard." Snape said shortly. "And that's precisely why I'm not seeing Madam Pomfrey. I know what I'm doing, Caitlin! It'll heal. Eventually. Shame the Asclepio Charm can't be used on yourself. It would save me a lot of pain."

Caitlin still looked worried. "Well, if you won't be talked out of it... But if it gets any worse, you get yourself to the hospital wing straight away, understand? Promise me, Sevi!"

Snape sighed. Caitlin was obviously not going to let this drop. "Very well, very well, if you insist!" he said, rather more sharply than he needed to. "Does that satisfy you, woman?"

Caitlin smiled. Twenty-five years of friendship with Snape had immunised her against his less than charming side. "Perfectly, Sevi. Now on to more pleasant topics. Isn't it the famous Gryffindor/Slytherin grudge match next weekend?"

"It is indeed. And you won't believe who they've got as their Seeker..."

The rest of Slytherin House appeared to feel much the same way as Professor Snape about Harry's appointment to the team. Although no one was really meant to know, the news had leaked out anyway, and the Slytherin reaction varied from scepticism to outrage to a real fear that he'd beat them to the Snitch.

Kat Stormosi represented the sceptical faction. "Come on, Marcus, just because he's famous doesn't mean he's necessarily any good. He grew up among Muggles, he's never even seen a game played before! Gryffindor obviously don't have anyone else and they think that a Seeker who might just worry us is better than no Seeker at all."

Flint was not convinced. "Kat, he's a first year. First years don't get on the team unless they're very good. Like our Marlie. I've heard all sorts about him, apparently he's as good as his father was. As good as Charlie Weasley. Aidan Lynch would have had problems beating him."

Mike clapped his sister on the back. "Well, they may have Potter, but we've got Marlie! And there's no one my sister can't beat to the Snitch! Is there, Marlie?"

Marlie grinned weakly. She privately shared Flint's views - first years did not get on Quidditch teams unless they were very good indeed, and the fact that Gryffindor were willing to play a first year with no prior experience on a broom could only mean that either they were very desperate, or that Harry Potter was very good. She fervently hoped it was the former.

The actual day of the match proved to be a fine, breezy November day. As Marlie followed the rest of her team out to the pitch, she couldn't help noticing that the Gryffindors were sporting a huge banner saying "POTTER FOR PRESIDENT!" with an animated Gryffindor lion. She was reminded of her own first ever Quidditch match, and the banner Deanna had produced for her. That same banner was at the Slytherin end, with it's changing messages alternating between "Go Marlie!" and "Enemies of the Heir, Beware!" Marlie allowed herself to smile. At least their banner had one up on the Gryffindor one.

The teams kicked off and the Quaffle was taken immediately by the Gryffindor Chaser, Angelina Johnson. The Weasley twins' friend Lee Jordan was doing the commentary.

"Johnson with the Quaffle for Gryffindor, neat pass to Alicia Spinnet, back to Johnson and - no, Slytherin have taken it, Laetitia Vetinari has possession and off she goes, good flying there, she's going to sc- no, stopped by an excellent move from Gryffindor Keeper Wood and Gryffindor take possession again - Katie Bell with the Quaffle, nice dive around Summer Montague - OUCH - hit in the head by a Bludger, bet that hurt - Slytherin in possession, Kat Stormosi off towards the goal posts, but she's blocked by a Bludger sent her way by a Gryffindor Beater, nice work, and Johnson back in possession - clear field ahead, she's really flying now - dodges a speeding Bludger from Flint - nearly there now, come on Angelina - Foxworth dives - misses - GOAL FOR GRYFFINDOR!"

The Slytherins howled with rage as Gryffindor cheers rent the air. Marlie swore quietly, and returned to marking Harry carefully. He did a couple of loop-the-loops then began searching again. Marlie was pleased to see how nervous he looked. Good, good, that'll give me the edge, she thought. Reaching for her Snitch necklace, she willed the Snitch to appear.

Lee was commentating again.

"Slytherin in possession. Vetinari ducks two Bludgers, two Weasleys and Bell, speeding for the goal - wait a second, was that the Snitch?"

Marlie latched on to it immediately. The Snitch swept past Laetitia's left ear, causing her to drop the Quaffle in fright as two Seekers swept after it in hot pursuit. Marlie grimly forced her broom to it's limits, hoping to outdistance Harry. However, a Cleansweep Six was no match for a Nimbus Two Thousand and Flint had been right, Harry *was* an excellent flyer. Marlie could only watch in horror as he overtook her.

WHAM! Flint had noticed that Marlie was getting left behind, and had deliberately blocked Harry's broom. Harry spun off course, clinging on for dear life. Marlie grinned and headed for the Snitch, only to curse again as it disappeared once more.

The Gryffindors shouted with anger and Madam Hooch wasted no time in giving them a penalty which they scored with ease. Marlie went back to marking Harry, dodging a Bludger with ease. Then it happened. Harry's broom suddenly lurched out of control. Marlie gasped. What was happening? Broomsticks, especially Nimbus Two Thousands, simply did not do that. She followed him closely. From the look on his face, he'd obviously lost control of it, as it lurched again.

"Harry!" she shouted. "Harry! Are you alright there?"

Harry looked at her, panic-stricken. "I can't control it! Marlie, help me!" he cried.

"OK, hold on, I'll try and get nearer, get you onto my broom, get a time-out called or something." She tried to get closer, but every time she did, the broom shot further away. It was rising slowly higher, taking him away from the game. Helplessly, Marlie followed.

By now, people were noticing something was up. The crowd were screaming and pointing, and even the other players had stopped what they were doing and watched carefully. Harry's broom was now starting to roll over and over, with Harry clinging on for dear life. It jerked again. Marlie screamed as Harry lost his grip and fell, only just managing to catch it in time. However, he was now hanging on with only one hand. Marlie tried to get nearer again, but the broom just moved away from her. She glanced down. Harry's team mates the Weasley twins had arrived and were trying to do the same thing she had.

"Won't work, Fred!" she shouted to the nearest one. "I've tried, it just keeps moving away." Fred and George tried anyway, but had no more luck than Marlie had. In desperation, they resorted to circling beneath, ready to catch him if he fell.

The broom lurched again, and this time, Harry really did let go. The crowd screamed. The Weasleys frantically zoomed around trying to get beneath him. Marlie felt the world go into slow motion. Instinctively, she reached for her Snitch necklace and clasped it. It was enough. As her Snitch flapped its wings and warmed up in her hand, her mind cleared and she kicked her broom into life. A Cleansweep Six might not beat a Nimbus Two Thousand, but it was by no means an inferior broom. With all her Seeker flying skills at her command, she raced towards Harry, snatched him round the waist and hauled him onto her broom.

Harry clung on to her with relief. "Thank you!" he gasped.

"Any time, Potter." Marlie said casually. "I once fell from a broom during a vital Quidditch match too."

"Really?"

"In my first year. Doesn't matter now though. Let's just get you to the ground, shall we?"

Marlie concentrated on bringing the broom in to land. It was slow and laborious work; this was a racing broom, and it wasn't designed to carry the extra weight of two people. Marlie kept her eyes fixed on the ground, and her mind focused on flying. So focused, that she didn't notice Harry gulping in mid-flight and clapping his hand to his mouth. Finally, she touched the broom down and let Harry slide off it. He immediately coughed into his hand and stared at the shiny gold object that had come out. Marlie's jaw dropped in horror. He had the Snitch.

The Slytherin common room was not a pleasant place to be that night. Virtually the entire house seemed to blame Marlie for what had happened.

"Look, I'm sorry," she protested to Flint. "but what was I supposed to do? He'd fallen off, he could have been killed! I couldn't just leave him there!"

"You could have let his team mates go and help him, while you did your job and got the Snitch for us!" Flint snarled. "Thanks to you, they're now second in the championship! They were the team to beat, and thanks to your little bleeding heart, we didn't do it! We've now got to win both our other games to be in with a chance. Thanks a bleeding bunch, Lovegood!"

"Sorry." she muttered.

"Should bloody hope so too. Don't do it again! Just be grateful you're still on the team; if we had a better reserve Seeker, I'd seriously consider side-lining you!" Flint stormed off in a huff. The rest of the team seemed to agree with him, for they were unusually cold towards Marlie that evening. Sighing, Marlie rejoined her friends, hoping for a warmer reception from them.

She was soon disappointed. Deanna was far from happy with her.

"Marlie Lovegood, you're my friend and I love you, but if you ever, EVER, go to the aid of a Gryffindor player during a game again, I will be left with no choice other than to whip some sense into you!"

"I'm sorry." Marlie said sulkily. "What would you have had me do, let him fall?"

Deanna threw up her hands in despair. "The Weasleys would have helped him. You should have gone for the Snitch while he was preoccupied! What kind of Slytherin are you??"

"Winning isn't everything, Deanna." Luella said gently. She felt rather sorry for Marlie.

"Yes it bloody is!" Deanna snapped. "If we lose the Quidditch and House Cups because of this...! How are we ever going to look the Weasleys in the face again?"

"There's more important things than Quidditch, Deanna." Rianne said absently. "I'm sure we'll make the points total up somehow. That House Cup will be ours again, wait and see."

"You weren't so sanguine when you were screaming at Marlie to get the bloody Snitch this afternoon." Deanna commented. Luella grinned. For all Rianne's apparent disdain for Quidditch, she had a tendency to turn into a raving, psychotic banshee when Slytherin were doing badly.

Marlie felt a little better at this. Deanna's reaction could have been worse, and Luella and Rianne seemed fairly supportive. She almost began to cheer up until someone guaranteed to lower her mood turned up. It was Draco Malfoy.

"Well, well. If it isn't our soon-to-be-ex Seeker. I must say, Lovegood, I'm highly disappointed. I was told you'd never lost the Snitch yet. I do hope the Gryffindors haven't been bribing you to throw matches or anything."

Marlie went crimson and shot to her feet. "I'd never throw a Quidditch match, Malfoy!" she shouted. "Especially not against Gryffindor! Just because I've got an ounce of compassion in me! Not that you'd know anything about that."

"If compassion is going to lose my house Quidditch matches, I think I'm better off without it." Draco drawled.

Something in Marlie snapped at the sight of Draco's smirking face. "Yeah, you would say that, wouldn't you! Your family's always been far too willing to put power before principles, haven't they?"

Draco froze. "And what exactly is that supposed to mean, Lovegood?" he said softly. Luella glanced at Deanna, who looked grimly back at her and reached for her wand.

"Meaning," Marlie said harshly, "that with a gold-digger mother and a Death Eater father, it's hardly surprising you've turned out the way you have."

Draco's face twisted with rage. "Say that again, Lovegood!" he hissed, pulling out his wand.

Deanna reacted fast. "*Expelliarmus!*" Draco's wand flew out of his hand. "I'm warning you, Malfoy." she said threateningly. "Try anything and you'll be sorry."

Draco just looked at her as if she was dirt. He turned back to his cousin with a mocking grin. "You want to watch this one's temper, Lovegood. Or you might get more than you bargained for. Especially if she takes after her father."

Deanna went pale. "What do you know about my father?" she whispered in a stunned voice.

"Did your mother never tell you?" Draco said, oh-so-innocently. Luella clenched her fists. If only she had her wand with her... but it was back in her dorm and of no use whatsoever. Draco grinned and continued. "Your father's a Death Eater, Tyler. Your mother used to sleep around with loads of them. That's why she never told you who he was, probably can't remember herself."

"YOU LYING BASTARD!" Deanna screamed, her face red with rage. She brandished her wand furiously. Rianne and Luella leapt to restrain her.

"Leave him, Deanna, he's not worth it!" Rianne said desperately.

"He's lying, Dee." Luella said quietly. "Your mum never slept around with Death Eaters, of that I am sure. She's an Auror, why would she? Don't let him get to you."

Deanna calmed down. "You're a lying scumbag, Malfoy." she hissed. Draco just grinned cockily and retrieved his wand.

"Be seeing you all. Children of Muggles and Death Eaters. You four make a fine little collection, don't you?" He chuckled evilly and walked off to where Crabbe and Goyle were watching, grins all over their faces. Deanna watched him go, furious.

"I hate him. I hate that smug son of a..." She glared at him, lost for words.

Marlie gave her a hug. "I am so sorry about him, Deanna." she said sadly. "I'm ashamed to even be related to that trash. Ignore him, it's not true. Caitlin Tyler is my mother's best friend, she is not that type of witch."

Deanna acknowledged them. "Thanks, you lot. I'm sure she wouldn't. Not my mum. She wouldn't. But that Malfoy... Oh, he will pay for this." Deanna whispered softly, staring fiercely at Draco. "He'll pay."

Luella however was doing some thinking. Something about Mrs. Tyler and Death Eaters, something important. She thought back to her first year. Doing some less than above board research into the Voldemort Years, she'd come across a Ministry report stating that Mrs. Tyler had been abducted and tortured by Death Eaters back in 1977. She thought hard. Something about that date... She recalled Deanna's birthday, 16th July 1978, and mentally ticked off the months. Seven and a half months into 1978,

and a month of 1977 after the attack which had been in early December. So eight and a half months between Mrs. Tyler's abduction and Deanna being born. Oh hell...

Luella made her excuses and left soon after, saying she needed to go to the library. Her bag slung over her shoulder, she headed straight for Snape's office. Granted, she wasn't certain about him. But a promise was a promise, and she intended to keep it. No way, she thought, no way is Deanna going through what Rianne had to.

She pushed open the classroom door and went straight to the entrance to Snape's office, hammering on the door. No reply. She knocked again, louder this time. Still no answer.

"Sir!" she shouted. "Professor! Answer me, I need to talk to you! It's Luella Martin! Sir? Are you in there?" No response. Luella sighed. Where was he? She thought hard. She checked her watch. Still early. He might be in the staff room still.

Turning, she ran. She had almost reached the staff room when she was intercepted by Professor McGonagall.

"Miss Martin!" Luella stopped in her tracks. McGonagall was not a teacher you played around with.

"What on earth are you doing here? Shouldn't you be in your common room? It's nearly curfew." McGonagall did not look pleased.

"Please, Professor, I'm looking for Professor Snape. He's not in his office, and I was wondering if he might be in the staff room. Is he there, do you know?" Luella smiled her most fetching smile. Professor McGonagall did not relax one bit.

"Professor Snape has gone out for the evening to meet a friend of his. If it is urgent, I can give him a message or deal with it myself."

"No, it's alright, Professor, I just wanted to see him about my Potions homework, I can talk to him in the morning. Sorry to have bothered you." Luella smiled and left, leaving Professor McGonagall looking suspiciously at her. Luella's smile faded as soon as she turned the corner. Of all the nights for Professor Snape to have a social life. Well, she had to hope he hadn't gone far. She fished around in her bag for a parchment and quill, and raced off to the Owlery.

Caitlin patted Snape's arm gently. "Ah well, we always knew Harry took after his father. We can't win them all, Sevi."

This did nothing to allay Snape's bitterness. "Damn him, Caitlin. Every time, every time, something good happens in my life, a Potter has to come along and ruin it. His father ruined my love life without even trying, and now his son is stealing my glory." He glared at her. "Why, Caitlin? Why does everything that family touch turn to gold?"

"Sevi, it's only a Quidditch match. Try not to get too worked up over it, it's not like you've ever cared for the game." Caitlin tried to soothe him.

"It is not just a Quidditch match!" Snape snapped at her. "Not today it wasn't! Would you like to know the exact circumstances in which the Gryffindors achieved their first victory over Slytherin in seven years?"

"Not especially, but I've a feeling you're going to tell me." Caitlin sighed.

"Quirrell. Interfered with Potter's broom in flight. Made it try to throw him off. It worked too. We so very nearly lost him."

Caitlin gasped in horror. "Holy Mother! Is he alright?"

"He's fine. I was performing the counter-charm, which gave him some respite. Unfortunately, Quirrell must have noticed, because someone set fire to my robes and distracted me at a crucial moment. No, I don't know who it was. I hope it was just a student prank, but I fear he may have an accomplice. Whoever it was put the flames out as soon as I broke eye contact and escaped without me seeing them. Their plan worked - no sooner had I looked away than Potter fell off his broom. Fortunately for us all, Miss Lovegood caught him and delivered him safely to the ground. Unfortunately, he caught the Snitch on the way down while she was concentrating on landing."

Caitlin was shocked. "Mel's not going to like this. She's not going to like this at all. Quirrell having an accomplice, that's not good news. Any idea who it could be?"

Snape shook his head. "None whatsoever. He's got no strong bonds with any other staff members, and I don't think there's any students who'd be working with him that closely. Of course, I'm not ruling out him manipulating a student into doing his dirty work for him. I don't think there's many who wouldn't jump at the chance to play a prank on me." He grinned wryly.

"Well, I hope for all our sakes you're right." Caitlin said nervously. A flurry of feathers behind Snape made her look up. A small brown owl had just flown into the pub and was approaching their table. Caitlin recognised it instantly.

"That's Deanna's owl!" she said, surprised.

Snape turned and looked on in astonishment as it dropped a letter next to him. He turned back to Caitlin.

"Do you have any idea what this could be about?" he asked.

Caitlin shook her head. "No. In fact, I can think of no reason on earth why Deanna would be owling you. Open it, what's it say?" She was filled with a sense of foreboding. There was no good reason for Deanna to be owling a teacher she hated, none at all. She hoped all was well, but her instincts were telling her otherwise. Snape opened the letter and raised his eyebrows.

"It's from Luella." he said, intrigued. He scanned the letter. It was not a long one. Caitlin watched as his face changed from being mildly interested to a look of absolute horror. He had gone white and his hands were shaking. Caitlin looked at him, concerned.

"What is it, Severus?" she asked, her voice beginning to tremble. "What's wrong? Is Deanna OK?"

Snape looked at her awkwardly. "I don't know if you should read this." he said cautiously.

"If it concerns my daughter, then I've a right to know about it! *Accio!*" Caitlin snapped. She waved her wand and the letter flew straight to her hands. She unfurled it and read.

Professor,

Well, you told me two years ago to come straight to you if this ever got out. Don't say I don't keep my promises.

There was a confrontation between Marlie and Draco Malfoy in the common room just now over the match today. Deanna stepped in after Marlie insulted the Malfoy family and things started to get nasty. Malfoy let slip that her father was a Death Eater. Deanna's reaction was predictable, and Rianne and me had to hold her back. Malfoy said that Mrs. Tyler used to make a habit of sleeping around with Death Eaters, and probably couldn't remember who Deanna's father was, that's why she'd never told her.

We managed to stop her from killing Malfoy. Everyone seems to think that he was just trying to wind her up, because no one's really discussing it much, or giving it much thought. Everyone knows that Malfoy and company hate Deanna, so no one's that bothered. There's a few whispers though.

Professor, is this linked with the time Mrs. Tyler got abducted by Death Eaters? There's only eight and a half months or so between Deanna being born and the abduction. Because if it is, then it's only a matter of time before Malfoy says something else he shouldn't. I don't want her to get hurt.

I'll be in your classroom until half nine or so, otherwise come and get me out of the common room if it's not too late. If I don't see you tonight, then I'll be at your office at noon tomorrow.

Yours,

Luella Martin

Caitlin laid down the letter in shock. Slowly, she looked at Snape. He had his head buried in his hands, unable to meet her eyes. He lowered his hands and gazed sorrowfully at the table.

"Caitlin, I am so, so sorry." he said quietly. "I know you didn't want her to know the truth. I know you just wanted to put it all behind you." He finally met her eyes. "Can you ever forgive me?"

"Not your fault this has got out." Caitlin said shortly. "That Malfoy brat... He has his father's vindictiveness. We had better get over there, find out what's going on. Do you have your broom with you?"

"Right here, I'm not walking long distances on this leg."

"Good. Let's go." Caitlin led the way as they both made for the door.

Luella leapt off Snape's desk as they walked in. She started to see Mrs. Tyler following Snape in.

"Mrs. Tyler! I didn't expect to see you here this soon."

"I Apparated in as soon as Sev- I mean, Professor Snape told me what had happened. Is Deanna alright?"

"She's fine." Luella said quietly. "At the moment." She looked at Mrs. Tyler, wanting to ask her what had really happened that night, but not feeling quite brave enough. Mrs. Tyler guessed what was on her mind.

"Yes, I was attacked and raped by Death Eaters, and yes, Deanna was the result." she said, a little harshly. "No doubt Malfoy Jr. heard something of it from his father. How did you find out?"

"Same time she found out about Branwen Stormosi, I would presume." Snape interrupted. "I made her promise to tell me if there was ever any risk of Deanna finding out about the attack. I am relieved to know that the promise was kept."

Luella shrugged. "I've got my principles. And I don't want Deanna getting hurt." She regarded Snape coolly.

"The only way that's going to happen is if we don't tell her at all; she idolises her father." Mrs. Tyler sighed. She turned to Snape. "This is not going to be easy. Are you sure we can't just keep a lid on it? I'm very good with the old Memory Charms..."

"Caitlin, I am not allowing you to perform Memory Charms on any of my students. Not even Mr. Malfoy." Snape said lazily. "I see no other way, my dear. You will have to tell her."

"Me?" Mrs. Tyler said angrily. "Oh, so you're avoiding all responsibility. As usual."

Snape motioned towards Luella, giving Mrs. Tyler a warning glance. She shut up immediately.

"I think, Miss Martin, you had best go back to your common room while we discuss matters." Snape said calmly, although the look he was giving Mrs. Tyler was anything but. "We will take it from here. Thank you for letting us know."

Luella left the classroom, intrigued now. What exactly had Mrs. Tyler meant by that remark? What responsibilities had Snape ducked out of in the past that he would rather no one else knew about? Was it one of the dark secrets that Mrs. Lovegood had threatened to reveal? Interesting. Very interesting. Her mind full of questions, she returned to her dorm.

Snape watched her go and let out a sigh. He turned on Caitlin.

"Will you watch your mouth, woman! Accuse me and blame me if you will, I daresay I deserve it, but I would much rather you did not do it in front of a student! Particularly not that one!"

Caitlin allowed her pent-up feelings full vent. "What, are you afraid of your past coming to light? I should have guessed why you were so eager for Luella to come to you if this got out. Altruism and concern for my daughter's wellbeing will always come a very poor second to your pride, won't they!"

"That's not true, Caitlin." Snape said, a hint of venom surfacing. "Would you like to have your daughter screaming at you in tears, demanding to know why she had to find it out from Draco Malfoy? Because I have seen a child do that to a parent before and it was not pleasant to watch." He glared at her. "Do you want the entire common room hearing your history? Because I don't!"

"Just 'my' history now is it? Your part is entirely forgotten, I see. How convenient! Convenient that your approach also precludes everyone finding out that you used to rape and torture Aurors for a hobby!"

Snape was on his feet now. "I did not make a hobby out of it!" he screamed at her.

"Oh well, that's good to hear!" Caitlin shouted back. "Great to hear it was just me then!" She crossed her arms and hid her eyes, shaking. Snape had the decency to look ashamed.

"Caitlin, I'm sorry. I am so, so sorry for what I did to you that night." he said quietly. "Believe me, love, if I could change the past, I would. Voldemort made me do it. I swear to you, the moment he led me in to the room and I saw it was you they'd captured, I changed sides. I stopped serving him in that instant. I swear it, Caitlin! I know I have done things in my life that are far from honourable, I know that I am not a man to be proud of, but one thing in me has never changed - I have always cared about you. Always. Even during my committed Death Eater phase, I still cared for you."

Caitlin slowly raised her eyes to his. Snape winced to see them brimming with tears.

"How can you say that to me?" she whispered. "How can you possibly stand there and have the nerve to tell me that despite everything you did, everything you were responsible for, you cared for me? Do you have any idea what it was like for me?" Her voice rose to a shriek. "Do you have any idea how hurt and betrayed I felt to see a man I trusted working for HIM? What I suffered was traumatic enough in itself, but at the hands of someone I thought was a friend..." She wiped her eyes, her voice trailing away. Snape stepped forward, but she backed away.

"Don't touch me, Severus. Just don't come near me. Don't even look at me." Snape stopped dead in his tracks.

"I'm sorry, Caitlin." he whispered. "I'm so sorry."

"I can believe it too. You and your wretched principles." Caitlin laughed harshly. "Just tell me why, Severus! Why you went through with it, if you cared about me so much. And why, having done what you did, you didn't just put me out of my misery. It would have been preferable to what I had to live with after." she said bitterly.

"Very well, I owe you that much at least." Snape said softly, leaning back against his desk. "I don't want to excuse my actions - there's nothing on earth could do that. But maybe if you know why... I joined up in 1974, two years after we graduated. Things weren't going well in my personal life, as you well know. I'd just suffered a severe romantic disappointment, the details of which I won't trouble you with further as you already know all about it. Anyway, I was devastated, furious, filled with hate for the whole world and everything in it. And it was in that sort of mood that I happened to encounter my old Potions teacher and House Mistress Lycanthra Lestrage. She saw my potential and recruited me, saying she could give me all the opportunities I wanted for power and revenge. So I accepted. I won't give you a catalogue of all the things I did as a Death Eater, but let's say that I was not a pleasant person to be around. I committed atrocity after atrocity, women, children, Muggles, tortured, humiliated, killed. And I enjoyed it. As a student mediwizard, I was the one responsible for keeping them alive so we could prolong the fun. And that's how my life went. Right up until one fateful day in 1977. Most of our victims were strangers, not human to me. Or people I knew but didn't care for. Then Voldemort summoned me to him with the news he'd captured a young Auror, would I perhaps like a turn with her? She'd already been seen to by some other Death Eaters, and he didn't see why I should miss out on the fun. So I put my Death Eater mask and robes on and followed him to the cells. And saw you."

Snape paused. This was not something he cared to remember. He felt the emotion welling up inside him as what happened next forced itself through his mind.

"I don't know how much you remember about what happened next." he said quietly. "You were pretty badly hurt anyway, and you were only half-conscious. But you were aware enough of what was happening, and you recognised me. I tell you, the look in your eyes nearly killed me. In that one single instant, I knew I could never serve Voldemort again. But I could hardly tell him that, could I? He was watching me closely. So I had to go through with it. He'd have killed us both otherwise. I thought, if I pretend to go along with this, maybe I can get you out of here later. Caitlin, he

would have killed you, and me too if I'd refused. Please believe me when I say I'm sorry. If I could have avoided it I would." He gazed at her desperately.

Caitlin gazed back at him disdainfully. "Pitiful, but believable. You never were that fond of heroic deeds."

Snape went red, anger creeping back in. "What would you have had me do, get us both killed? If you want dramatic stands against evil, noble and heroic deeds, making the ultimate sacrifice rather than hurt a friend, hang around with Gryffindors! I am a Slytherin, Caitlin, Slytherin like you. And when a friend of mine is in trouble, I do the Slytherin thing and accept shame if that is what it takes to salvage the situation. Caitlin, I'll never be a hero. I'm not that kind of man. Decency and fairness never came easily to me. I don't deal in moral absolutes, I just look out for my friends and deal with the rest of the world as it comes. I didn't save you or change sides because what I did to you was wrong, I did it because you were my friend and I couldn't live with myself after seeing you hurt, after knowing what I'd done to you. I'm a Slytherin, Caitlin, with all that implies. If you don't like that, don't spend time with me. I may not go in for noble gestures, but I did save your life. Dying in each others' arms is all very romantic, but at the end of the day it's better to live. Had it not been for me, you would not be here now. Deanna would not be here now." He looked at her coldly.

Caitlin laughed hollowly. "Yes, I suppose you are right. Deanna owes you her life in more ways than one. Seeing as we're on this subject, why don't you tell me how you got me out of there? I seem to remember losing consciousness at the critical moment."

"Easy enough. I asked Voldemort if I could retain you for my experiments. He seemed happy enough to allow it. I dosed you with a potion I'd just invented, called Sleep of the Phoenix. It simulates death in the subject. There's really no way of telling the difference between it's effects and real death. Neat little potion, I'm rather proud of it. Anyway, I gave it to you, and told Voldemort you'd died before I could do anything else. I dumped you in a safe place far away from our headquarters where you wouldn't be found, Transfigured you into an innocuous rock and left you there until I could come back for you. Which I did, the following day. Turned you back, gave you the antidote, started healing you. Which is when you woke up. You know the rest."

"Cute plan." Caitlin said mirthlessly. "Very cute. As long as I went into hiding, I was safe forever. Voldemort wouldn't bother looking for a dead woman, after all. I applaud your way of thinking. I haven't forgiven you entirely, but shall we say I'm a little more understanding?"

"I don't deserve forgiveness." Snape said shortly. "What I did to you was unforgivable. I let you down and betrayed you. I know I'll never make it up to you, but if there's anything I can do...."

"There's nothing." Caitlin said sharply, more so than she'd intended. The pain in his eyes caused her to soften a little. "Nothing you can do for me, anyway. But there is... another."

"Who?" Snape asked guardedly.

"You know who. Don't tell me you hadn't realised?" Caitlin said, amused.

Snape flushed. "Realised what?" he said, hoping Caitlin didn't mean what he thought she did.

"Deanna, of course. 16th July 1978 is her birthday. Need I spell it out?"

He sighed. "No, there's no need for that. I'm quite capable of simple arithmetic, Caitlin. I knew whose she was the first time I laid eyes on her at her Sorting. Seeing her being placed in Slytherin and checking on her birthdate merely confirmed it. Caitlin," he gazed at her with excruciating tenderness, "she's mine, isn't she?"

"Of course she is, where else do you think she got her pride, sharp tongue, and general all-round touchiness from? Not to mention those eyes. No one else I know has eyes like that. Come on, Severus. She looks so much like you, it's astonishing no one else has picked up on it yet. Congratulations, Sevi, you're a father." Caitlin grinned sardonically. She watched with amusement as the full implications of what she'd just said dawned on Snape.

"I'm a father?" he repeated, dazed. Caitlin nodded. Snape's eyes lit up and he suddenly found himself unable to stop grinning. "I'm a father!" He gazed at Caitlin, eyes brimming with happiness. "I don't know what to say. I can't believe it, this is what I've always wanted! I mean... are you sure?"

"Positive. But don't get carried away. If you went into the Nest now and told Deanna you were her father, she'd run screaming from the room. She has this image of her father being a John Travolta lookalike with the mind of Hercule Poirot and the suaveness and style of Sean Connery. No mere mortal could ever live up to that. You will have to be subtle about winning her over."

"Subtle is my middle name. I've always liked challenging women." Snape grinned.

Caitlin smiled coolly. "Well, you'll have your work cut out with my daughter. Here it is then, Sevi. Your mission, if you choose to accept it. Earn my daughter's love and respect. Be a father to be proud of. The day she freely admits that you're her father and she couldn't wish for better, that's the day you'll finally have my full forgiveness. What do you say?"

"It will be a pleasure, Caitlin." Snape said, smiling the first genuine smile for a long time. However, it soon changed back to his usual twisted grin. "I believe the first step is to get Deanna used to the idea of her father being only human. And the most effective way to do that is for you to acquaint her with the circumstances of her conception. Don't you agree, Caitlin?"

Caitlin's smile faded instantly. "You bastard, Severus." she said miserably. "How do you always do this to me? Get me to go along with these things?"

Snape patted her on the back. "That's the spirit, Caitlin. Tomorrow's Sunday, so maybe you can do it then, while she has no classes. I'll let you have somewhere private to talk if necessary."

Caitlin gritted her teeth. "All right. But you may have cause to regret this."

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Chapter Six In A Broken Dream

The general mood of Slytherin House had not improved much the following morning. Breakfast was a distinctly tense affair, with everyone except Luella, Rianne and Deanna speaking to Marlie only when they had to. Draco was the only one who was actually in a good mood - he'd started cracking jokes about how the Gryffindors were getting a wide-mouthed tree frog as their next Seeker. This did not go down well with the other Slytherins, who did not particularly want to be reminded of their first Quidditch defeat in seven years. After Flint had told him that if he made one more frog remark he'd be turned into one, Draco had shut up. He was still giving Marlie evil grins though.

"Look at him." Deanna hissed. "He thinks he's it! Like to see him be Seeker one of these days, see how good he is. Little sneak."

"Don't." Marlie said miserably. "He's a good flier. If we don't win the Quidditch Cup this year, I could get dropped from the team."

"It won't come to that, will it?" Luella said, worried. "Marlie, you're the best in the school. Everyone knows that. Malfoy's got nothing on you."

"I wish I shared your confidence." Marlie said morosely.

They were interrupted by the looming figure of Professor Snape. Marlie squeaked in terror and busied herself with her cereal. Luella backed away a little, while Deanna just gazed back at him coldly. Only Rianne maintained her composure.

"Is there something the matter, sir?" she asked curiously.

Snape did not immediately reply. He gazed into Deanna's eyes long and hard, an unfathomable look in his eyes. Deanna squirmed uncomfortably, but did not look away.

"Miss Tyler, I need to see you in my office immediately after breakfast. It's quite important." Snape said. Luella, noting that Snape did not sound quite all there, as if he was thinking about something else entirely, realised what it must be about. Snape gazed at Deanna for a few moments more before turning on his heel and returning to the teachers' table.

Rianne looked bemusedly at Deanna. "What was that all about?" she said, puzzled.

Marlie, rather glad that yesterday's game had not been mentioned, grinned at Deanna. "What've you done now, mate?"

Deanna shook her head, as confused as they were. "Nothing! I mean, I've got no homework overdue, my grades are OK, my last Potions assignment wasn't too bad, and I've been behaving myself. No fights, no pranks, nothing. I mean, there was last night's little confrontation, but it was only words exchanged, no magic or anything. So why the hell he wants to see me, I have no idea."

Rianne was giving Snape concerned looks. "Was it me, or did he seem really spaced out back then? He was staring at you like you'd waltzed in naked and painted yourself green while singing 'I May Be A Tiny Chimney Sweep'."

Deanna choked on her orange juice. She looked at Rianne with mock sternness. "I wouldn't know anything about songs like that, Ri. Seriously though, he was looking at me rather oddly. Is he on drugs or something? What do you think, Lu?"

Luella started. She had a fairly good idea what was troubling Snape, but could hardly tell Deanna that. "Maybe he's having woman trouble." she said, hastily distracting attention from herself.

Marlie and Deanna burst out laughing. Rianne looked distinctly annoyed.

"Woman trouble!" Marlie howled. "Him! Can you believe that?"

Deanna shook her head, wiping her eyes. "What woman in her right mind would fancy Snape?"

"Maybe that's the trouble!" Marlie giggled. Rianne stepped in to defend him.

"Will you two cut that out? Professor Snape's private life is no one's business but his own." Rianne snapped. "I'm sure he's just out of sorts."

"He's hungover. Spent last night drowning his sorrows after yesterday." Deanna commented wryly.

Marlie's smile evaporated. "Shut up Tyler." she muttered. Deanna immediately looked contrite.

"Sorry, Marls. Didn't mean to remind you." she said guiltily. She got up. "I'd better go and find out what he wants, anyway. See you lot around."

Luella got to her feet. "I'll come with you. Catch you two back at the Nest." She followed Deanna out.

Deanna eyed her curiously. "Lu, much as I appreciate the support, I very much doubt Snape wants you along as well. Or he'd surely have invited you."

"Don't worry, I've got no intention of gatecrashing. Just wanted to wish you luck and..." she hesitated. Deanna raised an eyebrow.

"And what?"

"Just that if it goes badly, I want you to know I'm here for you." Luella said quietly. She patted Deanna's arm gently and looked at her friend for a bit. Impulsively, she hugged her. Deanna looked at her in surprise.

"Lu, what's come over you? Anyone would think I was going to the electric chair from the way you're acting."

Luella tried to smile. "Well, you know. What with it being Snape and all. I doubt it's going to be a friendly chat."

Deanna waved her off. "You worry too much, Lu. What's the worst that could happen? Expulsion and he won't do that, I've done nothing wrong. Cheer up, Lu. I'll be fine." Deanna gave her trademark grin, before sauntering off towards the dungeons and Snape's office. Luella watched her go with a heavy heart. She doubted she'd see Deanna that carefree again for a long time.

Deanna entered Snape's classroom in a relatively good mood. She still had no idea what he wanted to see her about, but she'd done nothing wrong so she wasn't too concerned. She found Snape sitting at his desk staring into space, a sombre look on his face. Deanna's cheery mood began to evaporate. Snape didn't look angry, but he did have that same troubled look that Luella had had. She began to worry. Had something terrible happened? She immediately thought of her mother. Had something happened to her? Had one of her missions gone wrong? Was she dead, or perhaps worse, a captive of some Dark Mage? Deanna felt her insides go numb at the mere thought.

"Sir?" she asked tentatively. "You wanted to see me, sir?"

Snape looked up, startled. He did not relax on seeing her, although he did try and smile.

"Ah yes, Miss Tyler. Take a seat." He seemed nervous and unsure of what to say. Deanna stiffened. Snape, unsure of himself? This could only mean bad news. Very bad news.

"Oh gods." she whispered. "Is she all right? What's happened to her? What's happened?!" Her voice rose almost to a scream. Snape started.

"Who?" he asked.

"My mother!" Deanna said desperately. "Please tell me she's all right!"

Snape's expression softened at this. "She's fine." he said gently. "You need have no worries on that score. In fact, not only is she alive and well..." He got up and went to his office door and opened it. "She's right here. Caitlin!"

Caitlin Tyler stepped nervously into the room. She gave Deanna a weak smile. "Hello dear."

Deanna got up and ran over to her, hugging her. "Oh thank the gods! I thought something awful had happened to you."

Caitlin returned the hug, giving Snape an anguished look. "Not since you last saw me, sweetheart." she said tenderly.

Snape coughed quietly. "Deanna, your mother wants to discuss some family business with you, so I'll let you both have some privacy. I'll be in my office if you need me." He gathered up a pile of essays to be marked and headed out, giving them both a sympathetic look of support as he left. Deanna looked quizzically at her mother.

"Family business? What sort of family business? Mum, you're the only family I've got left. Aren't you?"

Caitlin sighed. This was not going to be easy. "I gather one of your housemates said a few things about your father last night."

Deanna gave her a strange look. "He might have done. Why?"

Caitlin gathered her courage and continued. "I hear he said your father was a Death Eater."

Deanna smiled. "Listen Mum, it was Draco Malfoy, he's always saying cruel things to people. He gets a kick out of it. You don't want to take him seriously, he's always making stuff up." She looked closely at her mother. "He *was* making it up, wasn't he?"

Caitlin didn't answer immediately. When she did, it was with her this-is-very-serious voice.

"Deanna, up until now I've never said anything to you about your father. I didn't think you were old enough to take it, and I'm still not totally sure. But I don't really have any choice. There's a real risk you could hear it from a schoolmate, and I'd rather spare you that. I'm telling you now because I don't want you knowing any other way."

Deanna fought this strange urge to be sick. "Mum... please... please don't tell me this. Please don't." she whispered.

Caitlin looked sorrowfully at her daughter. "I'm sorry, Deanna. But you had to know sooner or later. Malfoy was right, you were fathered by a Death Eater." She felt herself go limp with relief. There, it was out at last.

Deanna stared at her mother in horror. "No... no, it can't be. It can't be true. Mum, you didn't have an affair with a Death Eater, please tell me you didn't!"

Caitlin laughed mirthlessly. "No, child, I didn't. I was captured by them. I was their prisoner. And you know what usually happens to beautiful women when they're completely in the power of evil men."

Deanna couldn't take it in. "They... forced you?" Caitlin nodded. Deanna just stared in shock. Caitlin watched her silently. At length, Deanna spoke.

"Why, Mum?" she whispered. "Why did you let me believe he was a good man, a fighter on our side? Do you know how much I idolised him? How much time I spent wondering who he was, what he was like, what I'd say to him if I ever met him? I loved him so much, Mum! I wanted to be like him, I wanted to impress him, I wanted to be the sort of daughter he'd love and admire. That's why I wanted to be an Auror, so I could do brave and heroic things that he'd respect me for." Deanna choked on the words. "And you're telling me he was a Death Eater? And not only that, he didn't even have any affection for you? That far from being a martyr, he's the lowest of the low? Why didn't you tell me?" she howled, bursting into tears.

Caitlin put her arms around her. "I'm so sorry, love. But what was I to tell you? How could I possibly explain to a three year old child that she resulted from an act of violence? I couldn't do it to you. Instead, I just told you as little as I could get away with, and resolved to tell you when you were old enough to understand. Of course, I didn't think Lucius Malfoy's son would force it on me this soon; I was going to wait until you were sixteen or so. But if Draco knows something, then it's best for me to tell you before he does. Deanna, I'm sorry. I know how you felt about your father. I hope you understand."

Deanna's sobs had quietened down. "I thought he was so wonderful, Mum." she whispered. "I thought how special and amazing he must have been, to have made you fall in love with him. And now I can't think that any more." She dried her eyes and looked up. "It explains everything. Why Dexter Crabbe was so interested in my birthday and who my mother was. Why Malfoy and friends have been giving me those snide looks all term. Gods, any of them could be my half-siblings." She looked revolted at the thought. "Mum, do you have any idea who he might be? I mean, I suppose it wasn't just one, was it?"

"Well, I can't say for certain, but looking at how you've turned out, I've a fair idea."

"Are you going to tell me?"

"Not yet. You don't need to know now. When you're older and wiser. If I told you now, you'd want to murder him."

"So he's alive then?" Deanna said in wonder.

"Yes, he's alive."

"In Azkaban?"

"No."

"So he's out there somewhere even now!" Deanna gasped. Caitlin nodded. Deanna thought for a moment and a dawning look of horror spread across her face. "Mum. Oh Mum. It's not..." Caitlin waited patiently while Deanna braced herself. "It's not Malfoy's dad, is it?"

Caitlin burst out laughing. "Oh Deanna. Of course it's not! Do you look like a Malfoy?"

"Well, no. But I've got to check these things." Deanna said obstinately. "Gods, what a horrible thought. Sharing genes with Malfoy. Gag. Don't know how Marlie lives with herself sometimes. At least it's Auntie Mel's genes she shares with him." Deanna seemed to cheer up at the news she wasn't related to the Malfoys in any way. Caitlin breathed a private sigh of relief. Deanna was taking this much better than she'd thought.

Professor Snape edged nervously back into the room.

"Is everything all right in here?" he asked gently. Caitlin nodded.

"I'd say we were about done." she said quietly. Snape nodded mutely and glanced at Deanna. She met his eyes with typically Slytherin composure. Seemingly reassured, he turned back to Caitlin.

"Anything I can do for you, Caitlin, or are you leaving us now?"

"I'd better go, I think." She turned to Deanna. "Will you be OK?" Deanna nodded dumbly. "Well, if you need to talk, owl me, I'll come and see you if I can. Promise."

"Thanks." Deanna whispered. She hugged her mother goodbye as she prepared to leave. Caitlin kissed her on the cheek and left. Snape stayed behind briefly to talk to Deanna.

"I have to see your mother back to Hogsmeade so she can Apparate home. But should you require assistance that your friends cannot provide, I will be in my office for most of the day."

"Thank you." Deanna said, barely aware of what he was saying. She glanced up and found herself looking straight into his eyes. She was amazed to see there, instead of the usual cold cynicism, feelings of sorrow, warmth and tenderness. She quickly looked away.

Snape held the door open for her and Deanna went out. She heard the door close behind her, and footsteps heading in the other direction and guessed Snape must be following her mother out, but didn't really care. Wrapping her cloak about her, she walked swiftly back to the Nest, desperately trying to hold back the tears.

Luella, Marlie and Rianne looked up as Deanna entered the common room. Not pausing to look at them, she walked swiftly through it and into the corridor leading to their dorm.

"Uh oh." Marlie said quietly. "That didn't look good."

Luella got to her feet. "I'd better go and see how she is. You two stay here, I'll let you know how it goes." She followed Deanna out.

Deanna was lying face down on her bed, crying quietly to herself and cuddling Luella's cat Sooty. She looked up as Luella came in.

Luella closed the door behind her. She sat down next to her friend, and stroked her cheek gently.

"Well? What happened?"

Deanna wiped away her tears and struggled to compose herself. It was a while before she was able to speak.

"It's true. What Malfoy said. About my father. He was a Death Eater, Lu. Snape found out what had happened somehow and told Mum. She came up here this morning and told me. My father's a Death Eater. They captured her and..." Deanna's voice broke up and she found she couldn't continue. Luella held her silently. At length, Deanna recovered herself.

"I've been living a lie, Lu. My whole entire life has been based on a complete and utter lie." Deanna whispered. "I thought my father was a good, honourable man who died fighting for what he believed in. Now I find out he's scum. An evil bastard who raped and tortured my mum!" She broke down in tears again. Luella didn't say anything, just hugged her friend and soothed her quietly.

"I share half my genes with a murdering criminal, Lu!" Deanna wept. "I always thought that with a heroic dad, whoever he was, and a mum like mine, I'd turn out well, I'd be a top Auror, fighter for good. Now I just don't know. What if I end up like that, Lu? What if I end up as a Dark witch?"

"You won't." Luella said fiercely. "You're one of the most loyal, selfless people I know. You've got honour and integrity and all those things everyone says we should have. Come on! For thirteen years, you've been brought up to know what Dark mages are and that they're evil. That's got to count for something. You're no Dark witch."

Deanna shook her head, tears rolling down her cheeks. "How the hell do you know? You don't know everything about me. I don't know everything about me. I don't know who I am anymore! How do I know I won't start going down that route without even knowing it? How do I know I'm not the next Lord Voldemort waiting to happen?"

"You know it because you've already been given the chance to be that. Remember our first year?" Luella said firmly. "You pretended to be into the Dark Arts in order to incriminate Crabbe so we could get him punished. They offered to teach you Dark

Magic, didn't they? Promised you power and all sorts of things if you stuck with them. But you turned it down. You hung around with them just long enough to get the confession you needed and then you turned them in. Would a Dark witch have done that?"

Deanna was not convinced. "You didn't see me when I was hanging around them. Didn't see me saying horrible things about people behind their backs. Didn't see me helping them play cruel practical jokes on other students. You didn't hear what I said about you."

"Why, what did you say about me?" Luella asked, curious.

Deanna couldn't speak for a moment. "I called you a, a..." She swallowed as if she found the word difficult to say out loud. "I called you Mudblood, Lu!" She buried her head in her hands.

Luella looked confused. "Mudblood? What on earth does that mean?"

"It's a term some pure-bloods use for Muggle-borns and half-bloods. It's a horrible word, Lu, it's really bad. The worst thing you could call anyone, and I used it about my best friend!" Deanna sobbed. "I'm so sorry, can you ever forgive me?"

"Hey. You had your reasons. You were a spy, remember?" Luella said gently. "You did what you had to do."

"I didn't have to be so convincing though, did I? Didn't have to be such a bitch. And you know what? I enjoyed it too, in a twisted kind of way. Enjoyed having an excuse to act that badly. Part of me wanted to keep it permanent. Part of me saw you and Ri having such a cool time together without me and just thought 'Screw you two, I'll be with these guys, they like me.' I was really horrible, and I liked it!" Deanna cried.

"Yeah, and look at you now! Guilty and ashamed as hell about it, and begging my forgiveness. Do you really think Malfoy, say, would be looking back two years later and begging forgiveness for everything he'd done? Would he heck as like! And that's the difference, Dee. You're sorry. He wouldn't be. You've got a conscience. He hasn't. OK, so your dad was a Death Eater. But your mum's an Auror. You've got the potential to be both. And you can choose which parent you take after. You're not fated to be evil, you know!"

"I hope you're right, mate." Deanna said quietly, drying her eyes. She looked up at Luella. "Are you sure you're not angry at me for what I called you? Because it truly is the worst thing to call anybody."

"No. I'm not angry. You did what you had to. And I don't really have the heart to be angry with you at the moment. Actually, I'm rather glad you admitted that, it makes this bit a lot easier. See, I've been hiding something from you as well."

"Yeah? What would that be then?" Deanna asked, curiously. Luella squirmed uneasily.

"Not really sure how to tell you this, mate, but here goes. The reason it took less than twenty four hours for Snape and your mum to react to last night is because I told Snape what had happened, and he got your mum up here almost at once, don't ask me how. And the reason I went straight to him is because..." She swallowed. "Because I already knew about your dad. I read the Ministry report in the library while Marlie and me were looking for news about Rianne's mum. I told Snape about it after he'd finished lecturing me, and he made me promise not to tell anyone about it, and to come to him if you ever found out. Didn't actually know you'd been conceived then until last night. After Malfoy said what he did, I worked out the dates and realised. Deanna, I'm sorry I kept it from you, I really am!"

Deanna was staring at her open-mouthed. "You knew? You *knew*? You knew my father was a Death Eater and you didn't tell me?" She stared incredulously at Luella.

"I'm sorry, Dee!" Luella said desperately. "I really am. But I knew you'd be really upset when you found out, and I didn't want you going through what Rianne had. I'm sorry!"

"Sorry?!" Deanna screamed. "You didn't think it worth mentioning to me that I'm a Death Eater's child, and you're *sorry*?"

"I'm sorry!" Luella wept. "Snape made me promise to keep it secret. I'm really sorry!"

"Oh, so you thought you'd tell Snape before me! Well, that's wonderful, knowing he's higher on your list of priorities than I am. Really wonderful, Lu!"

Luella felt her own anger begin to rise. "Oh, so you'd have had me be responsible for two of my friends traumatised beyond belief, would you? I've already seen Rianne lose it completely over her mother being a Death Eater. I didn't want to see you go through the same thing. Now, I'm sorry if caring for my best mate makes me a bad person, but evidently I was wrong!"

"Worked well there, didn't it?" Deanna remarked sourly. "I found out anyway, and now you've got to explain why you hid it from me!"

"Look, Deanna, I'm not going to argue anymore. You think what you like of me." Luella snapped. "But at least you found out from your mum. At least you've been spared the indignity of Malfoy shouting it for the whole of Slytherin House to hear."

A small cough came from behind her. Both girls turned from shouting at each other to the open door. Marlie was standing there, with Rianne gazing over her shoulder.

"Er... are we interrupting anything?" Marlie said quietly. "Just... we thought we'd come and see what was going on."

Deanna and Luella just looked at the two of them for a moment. Deanna broke the silence. "How much have you heard?" she demanded.

"Enough." Rianne said quietly. She stepped into the room, walked straight over to Deanna and hugged her. Deanna was too surprised to react at first, but she recovered herself and returned the hug. Marlie went over to Luella, closing the door.

"Her dad's a Death Eater?" she asked incredulously.

Luella nodded.

Marlie seemed unable to take it in. "But... her mum's an Auror, she would hardly have gone out with one of them, surely?"

"She didn't. She was taken prisoner by them and didn't have a lot of choice in the matter." Luella said grimly.

Marlie covered her mouth in horror. "Oh my god, Lu, that's really bad." she gasped. She turned to Deanna. "Are you all right?"

Deanna let go of Rianne. She didn't answer, just held out her arms. Marlie, without a word, reached out and held her, before leading her to Luella's bed and sitting down with her. Rianne sat on her other side, while Luella sat down on Marlie's bed, which was next to it.

"Well, since Luella knows, I might as well let you two in on the thing as well." Deanna said, smiling mirthlessly. She proceeded to explain what had happened that morning.

Marlie listened in shock, her mouth open wide. Rianne just nodded grimly, understanding only too well. When Deanna finished, it was Marlie who was first to speak, turning to Luella.

"Lu, I can't believe you never told me! I mean, I was there at the time, right next to you when you found out!"

"Marlie, use your logic." Luella said wearily. "You and Deanna weren't speaking at the time, remember? I could hardly tell you, of all people. Who knows what you might have done? Anyway, I only found out that she was abducted. Didn't think to work the dates out until Malfoy brought it up."

"Give me some credit, please!" Marlie snapped. "I'm not completely heartless, I wouldn't have just dumped it on her like that. Besides, we had Rianne to deal with, I think that would have put me off anything."

"Good thing too, we didn't need both of us going nuts." Rianne interrupted. She turned back to Deanna. "How are you feeling now?"

"Better. Not as weepy. Just not able to take it in. Angry, very angry. I want to find the bastard and murder him for what he did to my mum." Deanna looked furious.

"Can't say I blame you." Rianne said, a trace of amusement flickering around her lips.

"Only thing that's stopping me is the thought of Azkaban. And that I don't know who he is. And that he's probably much stronger than I am. And..." She hesitated. "I don't want to end up like him." she said quietly.

Rianne and Luella exchanged looks of sympathy. Marlie however was rather less understanding.

"You won't." she said dismissively. "It's not in your nature. You're too honest. You've got too much integrity. You risked your life and your reputation saving me from Sleeping Death, and you very nearly lost both. Death Eater, my arse. You're not one and you'll never be one! Here." She reached behind her neck and removed her Snitch necklace. "Take this. Wear it for a bit. Keep it as long as you need it. A reminder of what you did. A reminder that you were in my soul for a bit. Having had you there, I know you pretty well, and you are no Death Eater. I'm telling you, if you were really evil, you wouldn't be able to wear it, it wouldn't let you." She fastened it around Deanna's neck. Sure enough, the Snitch did not react at all. Deanna held it in awe.

"Thank you." she whispered. She tucked it underneath her robes and got up, a determined look on her face. "Come on, let's go. It's lunchtime. I need to eat."

Food seemed to work wonders for Deanna's mood. Soon, she was almost back to normal. Almost. Luella could detect the cold, seething anger burning dully in her eyes even if Rianne and Marlie couldn't. She glanced at Snape. He kept giving Deanna looks of concern. As Luella watched him, he glanced in her direction. She gave him a quick smile of solidarity, which he returned before looking back at Deanna.

"Good to see you've cheered up a bit, DT." Marlie commented. "I'm glad it's not getting you down too much."

Deanna shrugged. "Well, you know. It's not like I ever knew him after all. I'll get over it. All I've lost are my dreams."

"They can be the worst thing to lose." Luella said quietly.

"Very profound." Deanna remarked coolly. "Nah, I'll be all right. He's not worth mourning, really. Hey, thanks for lending me your Snitch, by the way, Marlie. I appreciate it."

"Any time." Marlie grinned. "It goes nuts if anyone who means me harm goes near it or touches it. Does it around Malfoy all the time. Thought it might reassure you if it stayed normal around you."

"Well, it's fine at the moment. Warm, if anything. Comforting."

"Yeah, it does that if I'm upset, or anyone close to me is. Went really warm this morning, gave me this comforting tingling feeling all over. That's how I knew you weren't OK. And why we came to find you both. I just didn't feel right sitting back while you were in that bad a state." Marlie smiled.

"Well, I'm glad you didn't. Thank you. All of you. Yes, Lu, even you." Deanna squirmed a little. "Lu, I'm sorry I shouted at you. I know you were just doing the right thing. For what it's worth, I'm glad Mum told me herself. At least I don't hate her for it. Thanks, Lu. Friends again?"

"Friends." Luella said, relieved. "I'm glad you don't hate your mum."

"At least she had the guts to tell you." Rianne said bitterly. "My father didn't."

"Not her fault." Deanna said. "I don't blame her, I blame him! I wish she'd told me who he was, I'd go and punch his lights out! I mean, how dare he do that to my mother! Bastard!"

"Deanna, you would not win a fight against a full-grown wizard, especially one who'd been a Death Eater." Marlie pointed out. "Wait until you're an Auror, then find out who he is and get him sent down. Revenge is best served cold and all that."

Deanna calmed down. "Yes, yes you're right. No hurry. He's waited thirteen years, he can wait a few more. Just got to find out who he is now." She looked thoughtful. "You know, the library'll have all the old records, we could go through them and get some names."

"Yeah, in the Restricted Section. The Restricted Section, which thanks to you, we're not allowed in until we're in the fifth year." Marlie snapped irritably.

"Rianne is though, aren't you, Ri?" Deanna asked sweetly. Rianne, however, was having none of it.

"Don't even think about it, Tyler." she said firmly. "I am not asking for permission to visit the Restricted Section just so you can pursue some private vendetta. No. And don't go all hurt and reproachful on me. I'm not doing it!"

Deanna shrugged. "OK, I didn't really expect you to. And I'm sure Snape would find out somehow." She looked up at Snape, who was eating quietly and not paying any attention to her at that moment, just gazing off into space. "What's up with him anyhow? He's been acting really strangely."

"Do you blame him?" Rianne asked. "He probably thought it was going to escalate into a huge traumatic crisis like it did for me."

Deanna shook her head. "I don't know, I get the feeling it's more than that. He keeps staring off into space, then looking at me really oddly."

"Oddly how?" Rianne asked, intrigued.

"I don't know. Sort of like he's concerned about me. But there's more to it, like he just can't take his eyes off me. I don't know, it's weird. And you should have seen the way he looked at me after Mum left. Just for a bit. He looked... as if he cared about me." Deanna looked freaked out at the thought.

Marlie giggled. "Oooh! Sounds like Snapey likes you! Maybe he's got a crush on you!"

"AAGH!" Deanna pushed her food away, revolted. "Marlie! I'm trying to eat! Gods, that's horrible. He can't have, I'm only thirteen. Ack. Bloody hell, Lovegood, that's almost as traumatic as finding out my dad was a Death Eater."

"Sorry." Marlie grinned, not looking sorry in the slightest.

Luella however, looked thoughtful. Deanna was right, Snape was acting very strangely. He'd been staring at Deanna like he'd seen a ghost. She was reminded of his reaction on first hearing that she knew about the attack on Mrs. Tyler. He'd been very strongly affected, as if he hadn't wanted to be reminded about it. Mrs. Tyler's own words came back to her, that Snape was an old schoolfriend she'd lost contact with during the Troubles. How friendly had they been, Luella wondered. She thought back again. The dominant emotion she'd sensed in Snape that night had been not anger, not pain, not sadness, although they'd all been there, but guilt. But Snape isn't a Death Eater, surely! she thought, disbelieving. They wouldn't let an ex-Death Eater teach at Hogwarts. And he wasn't involved in the attack on Mrs. Tyler, was he? And yet... She looked hard at Snape. Then back to Deanna, who was explaining to Marlie about how to do their Charms homework. Deanna was irritably fingering her hair, which she hadn't washed that morning and as a result was far from it's best, limp and a little greasy. She glanced up at Luella and grinned, her black eyes shining. Luella smiled weakly back. She looked back at Snape. No need to even bother examining his hair; it was obviously the same high-maintenance sort that Deanna had, and Snape put far less effort into maintaining it. And then there were those eyes... They were the same colour, but without any of Deanna's warmth. Luella shivered. It shouldn't be true, it couldn't be, but it did look disturbingly accurate. No doubt about it, there was a definite resemblance. But Snape surely wasn't a Death Eater? Surely not. And hadn't he and Mrs. Tyler been friends? It was a mystery. And one she had to know the answer to. Asking Snape was a non-starter, but she did have to know. Which left just one other person...

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Chapter Seven Behind The Mask

Luella had a tough time concentrating on her homework that night. All sorts of thoughts involving Deanna, Snape and Mrs. Tyler were swimming around her mind. Was it true or wasn't it? Sighing, she laid aside her quill. Looking up, she noticed Deanna and Rianne in heated conversation.

"I don't care, I'm going to ask him!" Deanna hissed. "I need to know!"

"What makes you think he'll tell you?" Rianne whispered back. "What makes you think he knows?"

"They knew each other before, didn't they? She might have confided in him or something. Worst that can happen is he'll tell me to go away and stop bothering him."

"What are you two whispering about?" Luella asked, curious. They looked at each other then at her. "Deanna wants to ask Professor Snape if he knows who her father is." Rianne informed her.

Luella tried not to react. "Why?" she asked, trying to keep her voice level.

Deanna shrugged. "Why not? They were at school together, she might have said something to him. At the very least he may have a few ideas."

"That might not be such a good idea." Luella said, wondering how to talk Deanna out of it without giving anything away.

"Why not? Worst he can do is say no." Deanna raised an eyebrow.

"I don't know, I just... don't trust him, that's all."

Rianne looked surprised. "Why on earth not? He's a teacher. And think of all the times he's helped us before. He helped save Marlie. He supported us when we were trying to get Dexter Crabbe caught. He was most understanding to me when I found out about my mum. Snape's all right. I know he's rather less than pleasant most of the time, but still..."

"You worry too much, mate." Deanna said. "He seemed sympathetic enough this morning. I'm going to ask. See you lot later. I'll let you know how it goes."

Luella watched her go with foreboding. Snape might be all right now, but who knew what secrets his past held? She only hoped Snape had enough self-control to keep them that way.

Deanna knocked on Snape's door and pushed it open. Snape was at his desk, marking. He glanced up to see who his visitor was and froze. Deanna stepped nervously forward and sat down.

"Miss Tyler?" Snape said edgily. "How are you feeling now?"

"I've felt worse." Deanna said quietly. "Sir, I was wondering..." She fidgeted, unsure how to say it. "I was wondering, did my mother tell you..." She paused, her nerves fighting a battle with her willpower over whether to go through with it.

"Tell me what?" Snape asked, looking almost as worried as she felt.

"Well, she told me that you two knew each other at school, and I thought she might have said something to you..." she faltered.

"What about?" Snape asked sharply, more so than he'd really meant to be.

Deanna gulped. Nothing for it now. "Sir, do you know who my father is?"

She was completely unprepared for his reaction. He went pale and had to fight to stop trembling. Deanna was non-plussed. Professor Snape, the very essence of self-containment, afraid?

"What makes you ask that?" he said, shaking himself and appearing to calm down.

"Why do you think?" said Deanna quietly. "I want to know. I want his name, who he is, where he lives, what he looks like, everything. I want to know everything about him, so that I can track him down, find him, and make him pay for what he's done to us. I want him to pay, I want him to know what Mum and I have been through because of what he did to her! I want him to feel as much pain as we have, and more! I want the bastard dead!" She pounded his desk in fury. Snape seemed shocked by her anger.

"Miss Tyler, I hardly think that's..."

"What?" she snapped. "Appropriate? Necessary? Tough! He ruined my mother's life! He hasn't had to spend the last thirteen years looking after her! Do you realise how difficult it's been for us?" She gazed at him furiously, so furiously he had to look away. "Do you have any idea how lonely she's been? All her friends happily married with their own families, and her having to cope with bringing me up on her own? Not to mention what she had to suffer fourteen years ago! You've not heard her crying at night, you've not had to comfort her when she's feeling depressed about it all." Deanna's voice dropped to a whisper. "Two normal parents and a good home is all I've ever wanted. Instead, I get no father at all and a mother who's too traumatised herself to give me anything like a normal home life! Had to teach myself to cook at age five so I'd get a decent meal. Sums it up really. I don't know who's the parent sometimes, her or me." Deanna ran her fingers through her hair. "I always knew something wasn't right, that other kids never had to give counselling to their mothers, listen to their problems or help them to bed when they'd been drowning their sorrows. Other kids didn't have mothers who'd sit there with the same glass of wine clutched in

their hand for hours on end, just staring furiously into the fire, or sitting hunched up on the sofa, clutching a cushion and staring into space, tears running down their cheeks." Deanna's voice had faded to a whisper, her eyes haunted. "My first memory is her lying face down on the couch crying, and me trying to comfort her, cuddling her and telling her not to cry. I couldn't have been more than three and a half, maybe four. Do you have any idea how scared I felt? It takes most children years to stop seeing their parents as invulnerable and able to do anything. I envy them, I'd love to have that feeling of my mum being all-powerful." She buried her face in her hands, trying not to cry. "I spent most of my childhood scared out of my wits!" she whispered. "Just so scared that she wouldn't be able to protect me, that something would happen to her, that one day I'd come home and she wouldn't be there..." Her voice trailed off.

Snape could take no more. Getting up, he went to sit next to the crying girl, slipping an arm round her shoulders. Deanna tensed at his touch, but did not move away. In fact, after hesitating for a while, she leaned gratefully towards him and rested her head on his shoulder. With his other hand, Snape took one of Deanna's in his. She squeezed it gratefully. They stayed like that for a while, Deanna weeping softly into Snape's robes, Snape holding her tenderly. At length, Deanna let go of him, and moved away, drying her eyes.

"Thank you." she said quietly.

Snape's lips curled briefly into a smile but there was no joy there. "You're not the only Slytherin with problems. You're not the first to bring them to me when you're too proud to let your housemates see you like that. But you are among the ones I feel most responsible for."

Deanna raised an eyebrow. "Why?"

Snape hesitated. So tempting, so tempting just to take her into his arms and tell her everything. But Caitlin's words came back to him - "If you were to tell her now, she'd run screaming from the room." He fought back that oh-so-dangerous urge.

"You're Caitlin Tyler's daughter. And along with almost everyone else in the country, I live in fear of my life when she's around. Despite the fact she's an old friend of mine. Under no circumstances would I want to hurt her by not taking care of her daughter properly. But that's not the only reason. The other reason is that you're also worth caring about in yourself. Because you are, in my opinion, everything a Slytherin should be."

"Really?" Deanna asked in surprise. She blushed suddenly. "Surely not."

"Don't be so modest. You are. I wish more of my students were like you. You've got talent, integrity and cunning, tempered with a healthy dash of sheer nerve to make life interesting. You know, you do remind me of your mother sometimes." Snape said thoughtfully.

This mention of her parentage caused Deanna's smile to vanish. "What about the rest of the time?" she said quietly. "Who do I remind you of then?"

Snape looked away. "Deanna, don't ask me that. If your mother wanted you to know who your father was, she'd tell you herself."

"So you do know then." Deanna said.

Snape nodded. "Yes. Yes, I know."

"Are you going to tell me?"

"No." Snape got up and walked away, unable to bear Deanna's eyes on him any longer. "No, Deanna, I'm not. I'm sorry, Deanna, but..." He turned around to face her again, looking straight into her eyes. Good god, he thought, she truly does look just like me. It took all his self-control not to kneel beside her and tell her.

"Deanna, I think it's best if you leave now. For both our sakes."

Deanna hung her head.

"You're not going to tell me, are you?" she said, defeated.

Snape shook his head. Deanna got up.

"Nothing I can say or do to change your mind?"

"No." Snape said firmly.

Deanna sighed. Ah well, at least she couldn't say she hadn't tried.

"Suppose I'd better be off then." She turned to her House Head one last time.

"Just one thing, sir."

"Yes?" Snape said guardedly.

"All that stuff about my childhood."

"What about it?"

"I'd, er, be grateful if you didn't mention it to anyone. In fact, it's probably best if you forgot all about it. Sorry to have bothered you with it all." Deanna said, slightly embarrassed she'd revealed so much to him.

"Consider it forgotten." Snape said, torn between being amused at her pride or anguished at what she'd told him. "I am quite used to Slytherins leaving their secrets with me. I dare say I shall see you in Wednesday's lesson?"

Deanna nodded. "Until then. Oh, and sir?"

"Yes?"

"Thanks for listening." she said timidly. Then, she was gone.

If Deanna Tyler thought that her life was going to calm down after that, she was soon to be disappointed. This time, however, it was not Draco causing the trouble.

It began during Defence Against the Dark Arts with the Gryffindors. Quirrell was busy lecturing them about the correct way to dispel Boggarts. To say that most of the class were bored was something of an understatement. Marlie was distracted by Fred Weasley attempting to pass her a note. Glancing at Quirrell to make sure he was paying no attention, Marlie took the note and read it.

Marls,

Any thoughts as to what's in the corridor on the third floor that we're not allowed in?

Fred

Marlie pursed her lips, intrigued. At the beginning of term, Dumbledore had declared that particular corridor out of bounds to anyone who did not wish to die an extremely painful death. However, what with one thing and another, she'd given it no thought. Picking up her quill, she scribbled a reply.

How should I know? I've not been up there.

Fred slipped a reply back.

George and me are thinking of checking it out. Fancy coming along? Tonight, half eleven in the Charms corridor. Meet us if you're interested.

Marlie grinned. She had to admit, she was curious. And with Fred and George, who knew loads of secret passages and were adept at sneaking out after curfew, there was a smaller than usual chance of getting caught.

OK, you're on.

Luella glanced up, noticing with a wry grin Marlie and Fred passing notes to and fro. Despite Marlie's frequent claims that the twins were the bane of her life, she and Fred were forming quite a cosy little twosome. Luella smiled and turned her attention back to Professor Quirrell, who had turned to write something up on the board.

Then it happened. As it had done at the Welcome Feast, fear struck at her, slashing into her heart, a wave of sheer malevolence breaking down her defences, and a muted roaring, almost like a voice, screaming at her to reveal herself. No, no, she wanted to scream, no, please, leave me alone! She buried her face in her hands, desperately trying to hide from it.

The fear faded. Slowly Luella opened her eyes and looked around. The whole of the class was staring at her, and Professor Quirrell was looking at her nervously, more so than usual. She looked helplessly at Deanna, who looked horrified.

"Lu, are you all right?" Deanna whispered. Luella realised that she'd pushed her chair right back into Lucas Vetinari's desk immediately behind her and thrown her arms up to shield her face. Swiftly taking stock of the situation, she decided to make the most of the opportunity to get out unscathed.

"Er, no." she said, quite truthfully. "I'm, um, not feeling well. Er, Professor, may I be excused? I think I need to see Madam Pomfrey."

Quirrell nodded, speechless, and Luella swiftly gathered up her things and left.

Marlie steered Deanna aside after the lesson.

"Hey, Tyler." she whispered.

"What's up, Marls?" Deanna asked, puzzled. "Why are you whispering?"

"Keep your voice down." Marlie murmured. "And come with me."

Deanna followed Marlie around the corner to a quiet point where they could talk undisturbed.

"So what are you planning now, Lovegood?" Deanna asked, intrigued.

"Remember what Dumbledore said at the beginning of term?" Marlie said quietly. "About that out of bounds corridor."

"What about it?" Deanna asked, becoming interested.

"Ever wondered what might be in it?"

"Strangely enough, I've had other things on my mind just recently. Why, have you found out or something?"

"Not yet." Marlie grinned. "But by this time tomorrow... Fred, George and me are planning a little excursion. Fancy coming along?"

Deanna grinned. This sounded like exactly the sort of thing to cheer her up.

"You're on. What time?"

"We're meeting them at half eleven in the Charms corridor. Fred told me about a secret passage that leads there from behind that statue of Morgan LeFay at the dungeon entrance. That'll help us get there and back unnoticed. Come on, it'll be a laugh. You up for it?"

"Maybe. You sure Fred and George can be trusted?"

"Of course they can. They're mates! Listen, if the Snitch reacts badly when we meet them, we'll go straight back, OK? Are you in or not?"

Deanna grinned. "OK. Count me in." Her expression changed. "We'd better go back to the dorm. I want to find out what's up with Lu."

Luella didn't go to the hospital wing, but instead headed straight back to her dorm, where she curled up with Sooty. She was still lying there when the others returned. Deanna rushed straight over to her.

"Lu, are you OK? You looked awful!"

Luella pulled herself up. "Yeah, I'm fine. Just got this splitting headache. I'll be OK, don't worry." It was true, she did feel better. Not completely well, but better.

Deanna did not look convinced. "Yeah? You were dead pale and shaking all over. Wasn't she, Rianne?"

Rianne nodded, sitting next to Luella. "You looked terrified. Trembling and sweating, as if you were trying to get away from something."

"I wasn't scared!" Luella said irritably. "I feel perfectly fine, I just have a headache. Now please all of you, leave me alone. I will be quite all right, if you just stop bothering me." She got up and headed for the common room. However, despite her words, she didn't feel all right. She could still sense a malevolent presence somewhere not too far away, a presence that wanted nothing more than to see her suffer. Shivering, she walked swiftly into the common room, where the usual noise and bustle could make her forget, for a while, the image that had flashed into her mind during the lesson, the image of two inhuman red eyes...

She was in a pretty good mood as she got ready to go out. Dressing up in her smart clothes, running a brush through her hair before tying it back with a black ribbon, Luella Martin regarded herself coolly in the mirror. Dressed to kill, even if it is only Marlie's, she thought.

She went downstairs to say goodbye to her parents.

"Just going over to Marlie's, won't be long!" she called cheerfully. Her parents turned to look at her, her father lowering his paper and her mother putting her knitting down. Luella felt her heart skip a beat. Professor Snape and Mrs. Tyler were looking back at her in surprise.

"Going to Marlie's?" Snape asked, as if she'd just said she was going to the Prime Minister's. "What on earth for?"

Mrs. Tyler looked shocked. "But you can't go to Marlie's, dear!" she whispered.

"Why not?" Luella asked in bewilderment.

"Why not?" Snape said angrily. "Because you're the Heir of Slytherin, of course!"

"No." Luella whispered in fear. "No. I'm not, I don't want to be, it's not me, you've made a mistake."

Snape got up, a twisted smile on his face. "I don't think so, Miss Martin." He reached out to grab her arm. The sleeve of his robe rode back and Luella caught a glimpse of a serpent tattooed on his wrist. The sight of it caused the fear to lash at her again.

"Don't touch me!" she screamed and turned, running. The scene switched to Hogwarts, and she was running down the Slytherin corridor. She heard someone or something chasing her, running after her, footsteps becoming faster and faster, gaining on her. Hot breath on her neck, as her pursuer was almost on her. She didn't dare stop or turn round, because if she did, something horrible would happen to her. If she could just make it to her common room...

Reaching the entrance, she sobbed the password and stumbled through the door, slamming it shut. Sliding to the floor, she gasped with relief, safe. She looked up, and felt her heart freeze. A tall, black cloaked figure with its face hidden under a hood had been sitting by the fire and now was walking towards her. Luella went numb with fright, too afraid to move. The figure began laughing, high and cold. It pulled back its hood. Luella looked up, straight into a pair of blood-red eyes.

Gasping, Luella sprang bolt upright. All around her was darkness. She ran a hand through her hair, breathing heavily, heart pounding. Just a dream, she told herself, just a dream. She sat hunched up in bed and rested her head on her knees, allowing herself to relax.

Until she heard voices. And the sound of someone moving around the dorm. Luella reached for her wand, her blood running cold. Peering through a gap in the curtains, she was able to make out two figures, one standing, one kneeling down, searching under Deanna's bed. The standing figure was shining a lit up wand around.

"I can't believe you've lost your wand!" the standing figure hissed. Luella felt the tension melt away and relief go flooding through her as she recognised Marlie's voice. "It's every mage's most important bit of kit and you've lost it?"

"It's here somewhere." the kneeling figure whispered, in a voice that could only be Deanna's. "Hang on, got it." She crawled out and got to her feet. "*Lumos*." Wandlight materialised immediately. "Right, let's go. Don't want to wake them up."

Luella flung back the curtains, her own wand blazing into life, causing both girls to start. "Where on earth do you two think you're going, it's the middle of the night!" Luella demanded.

Both of them tried unsuccessfully not to look guilty.

"Nowhere."

"Hospital wing."

Marlie and Deanna looked at each other.

"Er, Marlie's not feeling well."

"We're only going to the common room."

"You two are the most hopeless liars I've ever come across. What are you up to?" said Luella crossly.

They looked at each other and sighed. Luella could guess what was going through their minds. Marlie no doubt thinking *Is she likely to get us in trouble if we tell her?* and Deanna thinking *Lu's safe enough. She'll be OK.*

Deanna turned to her. "OK, we'll let you in on it, but keep your voice down. We don't want to wake Rianne up, she'll go straight to Snape."

"You know that corridor that's out of bounds?" Marlie whispered.

Luella gasped. "You're not! Marlie, that's dangerous, we could get killed, or expelled, or anything!"

"We'll be fine!" Marlie reassured her. "Fred and George are going too, there's a secret passage that leads up there. We won't get caught. Just one look. That's all."

Luella slid out of bed and reached for her cloak. Despite herself, she was curious to know what *was* in the corridor that was so important and/or dangerous. Plus she couldn't face the thought of another nightmare. "OK. But I'm coming with you."

The three of them slipped out of the secret passage and into the Charms corridor. Fred and George were waiting for them. They did not look pleased to see Deanna and Luella.

"Bloody hell, Lovegood, we didn't know you were going to invite the whole of Slytherin House along." George commented. "We'd've started charging if you'd told us that."

"Oh be quiet." Marlie snapped. "They're my mates. They're trustworthy. So. This corridor then."

"This way." Fred gestured towards the door. Deanna tried the handle.

"Locked." she said.

"Of course it's bloody locked!" Fred hissed. "What did you think it was going to be? Left wide open with a big sign saying 'Witch Magazine's three-times winner of the Most Nickable Item of the Year Award This Way' hung over the top and huge great flashing neon arrows pointing to it? Perhaps with a set of footprints marking a little trail from the Entrance Hall for thieves to follow."

"Weasley, if you had a milligram of common sense in that Gryffindor skull of yours, you'd know that if a mage wants something kept safe, they're going to make a bit more secure than just bunging it away in a quiet cupboard with a Chubb lock on it!" Deanna snapped. "Honestly, bloody Gryffindors." She turned back to the door. "So what else is on this thing?" She pointed her wand at the door and intoned "*Sensor Incantatem!*"

A jet of light hit the door. They waited expectantly. Nothing happened.

"Nothing." Deanna said in surprise. "No spells whatsoever protecting that door. How odd."

"Right." said Fred. "Leave it to me then. *Alohomora!*" The lock unfastened, and Fred strode in confidently, with the other four following him.

He stopped dead in his tracks. Luella peered over his shoulders to see what the hold up was. And realised instantly why they hadn't bothered protecting the door with magic.

Facing them, taking up the entire corridor, was the biggest dog they'd ever seen. With three heads. Each one containing a row of very big, very sharp teeth. And the only reason it hadn't already sunk them into one of them was because they'd just woken it up. It was blinking at them sleepily, but one of its heads was already beginning to growl.

"Oh gods." Marlie whispered. Fred immediately began slowly stepping backwards.

"Ah. All right. Let's just slowly and carefully back out of here, shall we? Nice doggy, didn't mean to disturb you."

The dog was growling louder now. And getting to its feet.

As one they looked at Fred.

"Run!" he yelled. Something inside them all gave way, and as one, they made for the door. The dog howled in fury and made a grab for them. Deanna, last in line, sent a Fire Charm its way, causing it to back away whimpering. Finally, they all made it through the door. George slammed it shut, leaning against it. They all heard something slam against the door. George was struggling to hold it back. "Help me!" he whispered, pale with fright.

Luella hastily pointed her wand at the door. "*Aromohola!*" The lock snapped shut. The dog continued to bang against the door and growl, but it seemed to hold. All five of them slumped against the wall breathing sighs of relief.

"What the hell was that?" Marlie gasped.

Deanna recovered her breath. "Now, I don't know for certain, but I think that might have been Cerberus."

"Who's he when he's at home?" George asked.

"Guardian of the Underworld." Deanna told him.

"Well, what's he doing at Hogwarts?" Fred asked. "They've surely not opened a new entrance to it here?"

Deanna shrugged. "Couldn't tell you. Maybe one of Snape's experiments went wrong or something."

"It's guarding something." Luella said. "Did none of you see that trapdoor it was standing on?"

"Strangely enough, I was rather more concerned with its heads and the possibility of them making contact with my leg." Fred snapped.

"Lu, is there anything you don't notice?" Marlie asked in awe.

"Naturally observant, me. Oh hell."

"What?"

"There."

They looked to where Luella was pointing. Watching them unblinkingly were the blank, staring eyes of Mrs. Norris.

Deanna was first to react. "Quick. Back to that passage." They turned and ran in the opposite direction, hoping to get there before Filch did. As they turned the corner, they heard footsteps behind them and Filch's voice saying "Come, my pretty. Show me where they went."

They had reached the passage that would take them back to the dungeons. Fred was tapping his wand against the entrance and desperately gasping the password.

"Hurry!" Marlie hissed. Filch's shadow was now visible, getting nearer and nearer. Luella closed her eyes in desperation and prayed please don't see us, please don't see us. Instinctively, she imagined a wall between them and Filch, protecting them from discovery.

The passage entrance opened at the same moment as Filch came round the corner. The students froze in shock as he looked right at them. The corridor was well lit, and they were right out in the open. Now they were most certainly for it.

Then something strange happened. Filch ignored them. He simply stared down the corridor, puzzled. Then, he shrugged and turned angrily to Mrs. Norris.

"Drat it, my sweet. They've got away. Never mind. Next time. Next time they try anything, we'll be waiting. Come." With that, he turned and was gone.

The collective relief this time was greater than when they'd escaped the dog.

"What's wrong with him?" Marlie whispered in shock. "We were right here!"

"Who cares?" Fred whispered back. "He missed us, that's all that matters. Listen, this passage will take you back to the dungeons. We'll leave you here, OK? See you lot."

"See ya, lads." Marlie whispered, ushering Deanna and Luella into the passage.

They emerged at the other end and headed into the dungeons. Not far now, Luella thought, relieved. Nearly at the Slytherin Corridor. They reached it without event, and headed swiftly for the Serpent's Nest. Only thing in their way now was Snape's office. Luella hoped fervently that Professor Snape didn't make a habit of sleepwalking.

And it was here that their luck ran out. Snape was indeed awake. A light came from his classroom and voices were clearly heard. With a jolt of fear, Luella recognised them as Snape and Filch.

"Professor, someone's been out of bed. Trying to get at the Philosopher's Stone."

Snape sounded alarmed. "The Stone? Show me. Did you see who it was?"

"No, they disappeared before I could get a glimpse of them."

All three of them heard footsteps getting nearer. Before they could react, the door flung open to reveal the furious form of Professor Snape staring down at them.

For a moment none of them spoke. All three girls had gone white with shock.

"And what, I might ask, are you three doing out of bed?" Snape hissed savagely.

Luella didn't dare reply. To everyone's surprise, it was Marlie who answered.

"Please sir." she said timidly. "Deanna couldn't sleep, sir. She keeps having nightmares, sir. About her mum."

Deanna immediately tried to look as if this wasn't news to her, forcing her most scared, tired look.

Luella decided to elaborate. "We were wondering if you could give her some sleeping potion, sir. The type that gets rid of bad dreams. She keeps crying out in her sleep."

Snape seemed to soften instantly. "You had better come in." he said quietly. He disappeared into his office, and re-emerged with a small bottle.

"Here." he said, giving it to Deanna. "This should help. Works almost immediately, dreamless sleep guaranteed. You might sleep in, but given that tomorrow is Saturday, that shouldn't be a problem. Now get to bed, I've got things to do."

"Thank you sir." Deanna said softly as the three of them headed back to the common room.

Once inside, the three of them breathed the biggest sigh of relief of the evening.

"Oh my god, I can't believe we got away with that!" Marlie gasped. "We were that close, *that close!*"

"I tell you, Marlie, that was the best story you've ever come up with." Deanna said fervently.

"Congratulations yourself! That was the best acting I've seen in ages." Marlie grinned.

Deanna groaned. "Oh gods, now he's going to think I keep dreaming about it. He's going to be feeling sorry for me! Nooo..."

"Better feeling sorry for you than putting you in detention." Luella said firmly. "Or losing us points. Come on, let's get to bed. Deanna, I suggest you drink that potion when we get there, he's going to get suspicious if you turn up at breakfast tomorrow bright-eyed and bushy-tailed."

"No chance of that." Deanna yawned. But she drank it anyway.

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Chapter Eight Redeemer Rising

The next day, Luella had largely forgotten about the night's adventures. Deanna remained in bed until midday, suffering the after-effects of the sleeping potion, while Marlie did not feel inclined to discuss the matter any further. Rianne did most of the talking, discussing their Transfiguration homework and making the odd comment on why Deanna couldn't be bothered to get up. Luella said nothing, just letting them talk. It wasn't until they were leaving breakfast that last night's events leapt back into consciousness.

Marlie and Rianne had gone on ahead, discussing what they were going to get for Christmas and plans for the holidays. Luella hung back, something nagging at the back of her mind.

She passed the teachers' table, rubbing her eyes sleepily. The soft, oh-so-slightly indolent tones of Professor Snape caught her attention.

"How far did you get this time, Samael? Have you worked out how to get past the first hurdle yet?" Snape's voice carried a combination of interest and boredom.

"D-d-don't know what you m-mean, S-s-Severus." Quirrell stammered nervously.

"Oh, I think you do."

Luella stopped dead in her tracks. This conversation sounded just too interesting to miss.

"Come now, Samael." Snape was saying softly. "If you are seeking something beyond your current prospects, I can hardly fault you for that. Are we not both Slytherins? Do we not both understand power and its importance? Maybe we can help each other. What were you doing last night?"

Quirrell seemed outraged. "I w-was m-m-marking m-m-my third years' as-s-s-signments!" he snapped.

"Was that all?" Snape asked. "No matter. You will have other opportunities, I'm sure." He glanced up and noticed Luella standing there. "Well? Do you want something?"

"No, sir. Just leaving." she said quickly. She was about to walk on when the fear hit her again, worse than before. A torrent of rage washed over her, and she could hear a high, cold voice screaming at her to give up the fight and die. Clutching her head, which felt like it was about to split open, she sank to the floor whimpering.

"Please, no, leave me alone!" she heard herself crying. She was vaguely aware of people around her, and someone trying to help her up.

She fought hard, terrified. "Let go of me!" she screamed, lashing out then curling up as the fear worsened.

"Get away from her." a familiar voice cut through the howls of rage. Whoever had been trying to help her up let go, and she felt the fear die away as swiftly as it had come. Someone was kneeling next to her, an arm around her shoulders. She looked up into Snape's black eyes, far gentler than they usually were.

"Are you all right, Miss Martin?" he said softly.

Luella shivered. The attack was over, but she could still sense it around, this thing that seemed to hate her so much. She gazed unhappily into Snape's eyes. What she read there made her mind up. "Help me." she whispered.

Snape nodded. He turned to the ranks of students who had gathered around. "Well? Don't you have things to be getting on with? Miss Martin is not well, she does not need the entire school staring at her as if she's some kind of exhibit. Quirrell?"

Professor Quirrell, who had been standing watching, seemed to come to life. Stuttering more so than usual, he began moving students on. The crowd began to disperse, although more from the looks Snape was giving them than from anything Quirrell was doing.

Snape returned his attention to Luella. "Can you stand?" he asked her.

"I think so." she whispered, clutching on to him for support as he helped her up. "Please don't leave me."

"I'm not leaving." he reassured her. The look on his face changed from one of concern to one of annoyance as something caught his attention.

"Potter, didn't you hear me earlier? Miss Martin is not well, she needs rest and quiet, not the likes of you staring at her." he snarled.

Harry was standing there, Hermione and Ron behind him. He was looking at Snape with barely disguised hostility.

"Where are you taking her? She needs to go to the hospital wing." he said coldly.

Snape's eyes flared in anger. "I don't believe it's any of your business, Potter."

"She's a friend of mine, of course it's my business!" Harry looked furious.

Luella decided to defuse the situation. "Harry, leave it." she said quietly. "I'll be OK. I'm just overworked, that's all."

"Come with us, Luella." said Hermione gently. "We'll look after you, if you like."

Luella shook her head, smiling weakly. "It's OK. Don't worry. I'll be fine. You three go. Just go."

"If you're sure..." said Hermione, worried.

"I believe Miss Martin has made her feelings quite clear on the subject." Snape said acidly. "Now go before I start taking five points off Gryffindor for every second of my time you waste."

Harry led the other two away, not looking at all happy. Snape turned his attention back to Luella.

"Come." he said quietly. "Let's go to my office, where we can talk with fewer distractions."

The three Gryffindors watched Snape lead Luella away.

"Will she be all right, do you reckon?" Hermione whispered.

Harry shook his head. "I don't know. I don't know what Snape's planned for her. For all we know, he could have caused her to collapse like that."

Ron snorted. "Of course it was him. He says something to her, she turns to go and then she falls down in a heap crying out 'please, no, leave me alone'. And she seems to recover as soon as he gets near her. Now if that's not some kind of psychic attack, I'd like to know what is."

Hermione bit her lip. "I don't know, why would Snape do that to someone in his own House? And one of his brightest and best young students at that?"

Harry shrugged. "Who knows? But I wouldn't put it past him. Maybe he wants her to work for him and she won't. Maybe he needs her help and he's trying to force her into it."

Ron looked anxiously at the door Snape had led Luella through.

"Do you think we should go after her, make sure she's all right?"

Harry and Hermione turned to stare at him.

"Ron, you hate Luella." said Hermione.

"Yeah, Ron, you said she was an untrustworthy Slytherin git and we shouldn't have anything to do with her." said Harry.

Ron shuffled uneasily. "Yeah, but that was before. I mean, she can't be all bad if Snape's trying to attack her, can she?"

Hermione and Harry just grinned at each other.

"No, Ron."

"Of course not, Ron."

Luella followed Snape silently to his office. Snape, seeming to sense how she was feeling, deliberately slowed his pace so she could keep up, for which Luella felt profoundly grateful. She could still sense something out there, looking for her, trying to hunt her down. Shivering, she drew closer to Snape for comfort.

And then she felt it again. Clutching desperately at Snape's robes, she sank to her knees sobbing.

"Help me, please, don't let it get me, please, please!" she wept. Snape dropped to her side immediately.

"Luella, it's all right. No one's going to hurt you." she heard him say gently, stroking her hair. She was aware of someone approaching and Snape turning to see who it was.

"Quirrell!" she heard him snarl. "I thought I told you to stay away from her!"

"I c-came to see if you n-needed any help, Severus." she heard him stammer.

"None from you, Samael." Snape's voice cut him short. "Are you Head of Slytherin House or am I?"

No response. Snape was speaking again. "Good, then we know where we stand. I trust you remember what I said to you two years ago, about what would happen if any of my Slytherins fell victim to Dark magic again?"

Again no answer. Luella heard the sound of someone turning and walking away. Slowly, very slowly, the fear subsided. Luella opened her eyes.

"What's happening to me?" she whispered tearfully. "Am I going mad?"

Snape didn't answer her, just pulled her close. "Come on." he said quietly. "We need to get you to my office immediately. No, don't try to get up." Luella had been trying to get to her feet, but stopped. "I'll carry you." She let him scoop her up into his arms and rested her head gratefully against him. She didn't know what it was, but the fear felt less acute, less sharp when Snape was nearby. Without another word, Snape turned and walked swiftly through the dungeons towards the Slytherin Corridor.

Snape carried her into his office and set her down. Luella collapsed into a chair and sat there quietly, huddled up, trying to calm herself. Slowly but surely, she felt the presence fade and her mind return to normal. She dried her eyes and looked at Snape, who was going through his store cupboard. He returned with a small phial of potion, which he poured into a cup for her. She took it dubiously.

"What is it?"

"A Nerve-Calming Potion. I usually keep a small supply in. It will help you a little."

Luella drank it gratefully, feeling her entire body warming up and tingling all over. In a few moments, she felt much calmer.

"Thank you." she smiled weakly. Snape returned the smile briefly before pulling up a chair and sitting next to her.

"How are you feeling now?" he asked softly.

"Better." She shuddered, remembering how it had been only minutes before.
"Professor, I think I'm losing my mind."

"Well, why don't you tell me what was going on there, and we'll see what we can do." His voice sounded calm enough, but Luella could tell that it was masking worry and concern. She took a deep breath.

"Something's after me. I've felt it ever since term began. At the Welcome Feast. It was terrifying. I just felt this fear, like I was going to die or something. Then it went away, but I couldn't relax. I just had this feeling that I was in danger, that something was wrong. That somewhere out there is this person, this thing, that hates me and wants me dead, and it's looking for me. I've been feeling like this all term, on and off, but yesterday, it suddenly got worse."

"Worse how?"

"During Defence Against the Dark Arts, I felt it again, like it had been at the feast. Except it was worse, much closer. Like whatever's looking for me was right near me and aware of me. I had to leave the lesson, I was shaking so badly. Went back to my dorm and stayed there. Then this morning it happened to me again. And this time it was the worst it had ever been. At least yesterday I could walk away from it. Not today." She shivered. "Well, you saw me, I was a complete wreck. Thank god you were there. I couldn't have coped without you. Thank you." said Luella huskily.

"It's my job, Luella. But nevertheless, I'm touched by your gratitude." said Snape, amused. "So, do you still think I'm saving you as a sacrifice for Lord Voldemort?"

Luella shook her head. "No."

"Good. Because I'm not. I admit to being under orders to observe and protect you, and I do have certain responsibilities as your teacher and House Master, but don't think I've no feelings for you personally. Because you've got a lot of potential, one of the finest minds I've ever encountered and what's more, you've got a personality, which is a lot more than I can say for some of your housemates. You'll go far, and I'll be proud to witness it. However, right now, I'm deeply concerned about you." Snape was no longer smiling.

Luella shuddered, reminded of why she was here. "What's causing it? Do you know? Because I've never been so afraid in my life. This thing, it hates me! Keeps screaming

furiously at me that it's going to kill me, that when it finds me, I'll wish I'd never been born. I'm so scared..." Her voice trailed off. "Help me, Professor." she whispered.

"I'll do what I can." Snape promised. He looked thoughtful. "You say it got suddenly worse in Defence Against the Dark Arts?" Luella nodded.

"And this morning, you seemed to become more agitated when Professor Quirrell went to your assistance. When he tried to help you up, you nearly broke his nose."

"Did I?" said Luella, shocked. "Oh my god, I don't remember doing that at all. Just someone trying to help me up and the fear suddenly getting worse, much worse. I just lashed out. Oops. Can you apologise to him for me?"

"I'll do no such thing. Apologise to him yourself. If, that is, you still feel sorry. Anyway, you seemed to calm down when I went to you myself and made him get out of the way."

Luella nodded. "Yes, it was strange. It went quite suddenly. Like there was something about you which made it back down for a while. I could still sense it though."

"Doubtless. Your senses returned, and you were able to talk to me and Potter, and you were able to walk out of there. In fact, you were recovering quite well until we were in the dungeons."

"Yeah, it came back. And how." Luella shivered. "So much more powerful that time. Before it had just been wildly lashing out at me. But then, it was so focused. Like it was deliberately trying to attack me, trying to bring me down. I just couldn't do anything."

Snape was nodding knowingly. "Were you aware of anything going on at the time?"

"I heard you talking to someone, Professor Quirrell, wasn't it? Telling him to get lost, you were all right on your own. Except rather more threatening and sarcastic than that. And it went away again." Luella regarded Snape carefully, secretly rather impressed. "How do you do it? I wish you'd teach me."

"What, the subtle art of sarcasm? If you need to be taught, you're not cut out for it." Snape grinned. Luella laughed.

"No, after two years of your lessons and ten years of hanging around Deanna, I think I've got sarcasm down to a fine art. No, I want to know how to protect myself. Doubt Quirrell'd be any good at teaching me."

Snape met her eyes levelly. "There you have it, Luella. Your problem in a nutshell. Professor Quirrell is no good for you. In fact, I would go so far as to say that he would only serve to worsen your predicament."

"What?" Luella said in disbelief.

"Think. In whose lesson did the fear begin to overwhelm you? Who was near you when it struck again, and whose touch made it worse? And whose presence was enough to completely break down your defences?"

"You don't mean... Professor Quirrell?" Luella was openmouthed. Snape nodded. Luella couldn't take it in. "But he's a teacher! He wouldn't want to hurt me, would he?"

Snape raised an eyebrow. "So am I, yet until recently you were rather less charitable about my motives."

"That's different. You're different. You're not really like a teacher."

"How's that?" Snape asked, intrigued.

"I don't know. You just seem more... more, well, competent."

Snape burst out laughing. "More competent! I'm flattered. What would my colleagues say if they knew that. They'd be most put out."

Luella shook her head. "I didn't mean it like that. I just meant that most of them don't seem to have a life outside teaching. But you do. It's like you're more of a real person. You've seen things out there, you've lived. Do you know what I mean?"

A shadow crossed over Snape's face. "I've seen things all right. Don't know whether you could call it living though. More like surviving."

"That's what I mean. McGonagall or Flitwick would never have said anything like that." said Luella quietly. "You've got scars all over your psyche, that no one else I know has. And yet you're here and you're sane. You've been there before me, haven't you? So help me now." She gazed fiercely into his eyes, silver-blue staring into black. "Help me."

Snape reached out and took her hand, squeezing it gently. "You have my word." He sat back, releasing her. "But first, we need to ascertain what's causing it. You react especially badly to Quirrell's presence. Why?"

"I don't know. Why would Quirrell want to kill me?" whispered Luella.

"Maybe it's not Quirrell. Maybe it's someone he's working with. Or for."

"He's working with someone else who wants me dead? But who? I'm just a kid!" Luella said in wonder.

Again that intense gaze from Snape. "Are you?"

Luella felt her blood run cold with horror. "Oh god. Oh no. Please. Not him. It can't be." She looked wildly at Snape, desperate for any crumb of comfort. Snape said nothing, just looked steadily back at her. Luella felt her self-control snap and the fear come rushing back.

"I'm not ready!" she whispered, holding herself tightly to try and stop herself shaking. "I'm only thirteen, I can't possibly face him yet. I can't do it, Professor. He can't be back, he can't be. Not... not You-Know-Who..."

"Easy to be brave about saying the name when you think he's dead and gone, isn't it?" Snape said with a touch of bitterness. "Now at least you know what you're really up against. Yes, Luella, I do believe Lord Voldemort is coming back."

Luella squealed at the mention of the name. Snape was unrepentant. "Be quiet, girl. Crying, begging for mercy, it won't protect you. Not from him. He won't respect your weakness, just use it against you and laugh while he's doing it. No use appealing to his better nature; he doesn't have one. If you want to survive to fight him, you are going to have to be tough. And that means having the courage to name him. Say it, child." He took her head in his hands and stared deep into her eyes. "Say it!" he hissed.

"Let go of me!" Luella wept, struggling. "Let go, you're hurting me!"

"Not nearly as much as he would. Now say the name!"

"Damn you." Luella whispered furiously. "Damn you! Let me go!"

"That's better. Now you're fighting. Feel the anger, it'll fuel your power. Now. Send it back to him. Let him feel your rage for once!" Snape hissed, but less angry than he had been.

Luella's face twisted with fury as she wriggled out of Snape's grip and pushed him away. "Damn you! Damn you both! You and him!"

"Who? Name him, child!"

"You-Know-Who. The Dark Lord. Lord bloody Vol-de-mort!" she snarled, leaping to her feet and kicking her chair over. Growling, she gazed around the room swiftly, her eyes flashing dangerously as she tried to sense where he might be. "Damn you to hell, Voldemort. Damn you to HELL!" She screamed the last word. On the other side of the room, one of the many jars exploded, sending shards of glass everywhere. Snape, with the reflexes of one who had spent most of his adult life dealing with potentially unstable concoctions, dived to the floor instinctively. Luella was less fortunate. A flying piece of glass caught her cheek causing her to cry out and drop to the floor. She reached out and touched her face, wincing as she saw her fingers covered in blood. Snape produced his wand and crawled over to her. "*Asclepio*," he murmured, touching it to her face. Luella felt the pain disappear immediately. She sat in silence as Snape cleaned the blood off her hand.

"How are you feeling now?" he asked her, a wry grin on his face.

Luella reached irritably behind her head and removed the black ribbon that normally tied her hair back, allowing it to flow free for once. "Damn you. You're a bastard, you know that?"

"Count yourself fortunate I like you, Luella Martin. Not that you're the first to have called me that, by any means. For what it's worth, I'm sorry I pushed you like that. Believe it or not, it wasn't pleasant for me either. But I had to do it. Had to get you angry at him. It's the only way to fight him, the only way. You understand why I did it, don't you?"

Luella nodded quietly. "If I'm angry at him, I don't have the chance to be frightened."

"Correct. More than that, you can reverse the roles and beat him at his own game. He is as frightened of you as you were of him. That is why he wants you dead. He fears you. There is an ancient saying among us Slytherins, Luella. Where there's fear there's power. Another related one is that when people are frightened of you, you can do anything. Make him fear you. And understand that his every action is driven by fear that someone will take his power from him, fear that you will take it from him. Know that he fears you. And with that knowledge, find your power. You are the Redeemer. You will bring him down. Because you are stronger, and because you don't rely solely on fear for your power. Now. How do you feel?"

Luella gazed coolly into his eyes. "Alive." she said, a grim smile spreading across her face. "Absolutely, positively, alive. And most definitely kicking." She shook her head, causing her hair to fall over her shoulders.

Snape smiled in return. "Well done, Luella Martin. Consider your lesson learned. Now you know why you're one of my favourite students."

Luella merely inclined her head. "Well, when you're learning from the best..." She laughed and got to her feet, surveying the damage. "Oh my. Erm, sorry about that. My temper gets the better of me sometimes."

"No need to apologise. One day you may be glad of it. Don't worry about it, I'm quite used to clearing up after experiments gone wrong. A few Reparo charms should be sufficient." Snape got to his feet to show her out. He turned her to face him. "If it happens again and you need my support, find me. You know I'm on your side."

"I know." Luella smiled. "Thank you."

Luella was met by the entire common room falling silent as she walked in. Clearly word had got around.

Draco was first to approach her, smirking, Crabbe and Goyle either side of him.

"Is it true, Martin? They say you fainted at breakfast this morning. Crying and screaming."

Luella just gazed straight into his eyes. Strange, she thought, they're the same colour as mine, I never noticed that before. All she said, however, was a simple, venomous "Shut up, Malfoy." Draco took a few steps backward and hastily walked away, shrinking from the look in her eyes. She swept her eyes around the room, causing

even the bravest Slytherins to look away. Across the room, Marlie walked straight over to her, Rianne in tow.

"Lu, are you all right?" Marlie gasped. "You were in an awful state. Professor Snape just snapped at us irritably to go away. What's up?"

Luella gazed at them both, sizing them up. She remembered their first year. So this was what it was like, going through a crisis and beating it. Rianne and Marlie had both had their own initiations into life's harsher lessons that year.

"I'll tell you both in the dorm. Come on. Let's get Tyler out of her pit."

They returned to the dorm to find Deanna staggering out of bed.

"My head." Deanna groaned. "What was in that potion of Snape's? I feel like I've done ten rounds with Voldemort."

"Don't be silly, if you'd done ten rounds with Voldemort, you'd be dead." Luella replied candidly, sitting down. "Marlie, lock the door. We need to talk. All of us."

Marlie locked the door and pulled up a chair. Rianne had already sat down and Deanna was rubbing her eyes, taking in Luella for the first time. This served to wake her up at once.

"Lu, what's happened to you? You look..." Deanna struggled to find the words. "Different. Older. You look like..." she hesitated. "You look like my mum."

"Very flattering. And not entirely groundless. We've both had brushes with Lord Voldie, after all."

"Voldemort?" Marlie gasped. "When have you encountered Voldemort?"

"Today." Luella said quietly. "Today, I fought him and won the first round. He's coming back, folks. And we're going to be in the front line."

She surveyed her friends to see how they'd taken the news. Marlie hadn't reacted at all, she was just staring into space. Deanna looked disbelieving. Rianne looked horrified.

"Coming back...?" she whispered. "You-Know-Who, coming back? But he's dead, surely? He can't be..." Her voice trailed off. Luella smiled grimly.

"I'm sure that's what he'd like you to think. But he's not dead. He's got no body and very little power, but he's not dead. And he's trying to come back."

Deanna laughed scornfully. "Lu, while I'm quite willing to believe he could stage a comeback, have you actually got any proof of this? Or have you just been around Professor Snape for too long?"

Luella got up and started pacing the room. "All right. You want proof, you got it. But first there's something you all need to know. Deanna, I know you already know this. Rianne, I'm pretty certain you don't. Marlie, I'm not sure about you, but I think you probably do." She took a deep breath. "Are you all familiar with the Redeemer Prophecy?"

Rianne nodded. "Yeah, two Slytherin Muggle-borns born a thousand years after Slytherin's downfall. One who'll bring Slytherin House to its knees, and one who'll save it. But what...?"

"What does it have to do with now? I'll tell you. Slyth number one is Lord Voldemort, who almost brought this house to the brink while he was around last time. We were never trusted before, but the spectre of the Dark Lord has made it far, far worse. We don't even trust ourselves now." She drew a deep breath and fixed them all keenly. "But there's hope. Fifty years after he was born, as foretold by the prophecy, Slyth number two was born to a humble Muggle family. She grew up, she went to Hogwarts, she ended up in Slytherin." Luella smiled bitterly. "Slyth number two is me."

Marlie raised her eyes to look at Luella. She didn't look shocked, just resigned, and Luella knew instantly that she did indeed know the truth. Deanna was giving Luella her 'I hope you know what you're doing' look. Rianne was staring blankly.

"You? Slytherin Redeemer?" She seemed to get over the shock. "You can't be, you're just a kid."

"So was Voldemort once."

Rianne winced. "Stop saying that name!" She stared disbelievingly at Luella. "It can't be you. You're a friend of mine, you can't be the Redeemer! You've always been so, well, ordinary. How can you possibly be the Redeemer?"

Marlie spoke up quietly. "No, it's true, Ri. I was there when she got her wand. Saw the Slytherin Serpent come out of it with my own eyes. Mum told me what it meant when we got home, made me promise to keep an eye on her and not tell anyone."

"And you never bothered mentioning it?" Rianne asked hollowly.

"No I didn't! You didn't see Mum when she was telling me." Marlie snapped. "I have never ever seen her like that before or since. It is the first and only time I have ever seen her frightened. I tell you, after seeing her like that, there was no way I was going to argue! Tyler, did you know?"

Deanna smiled grimly. "Course I knew. Mum told me and Luella both when we got home. And told me before the train left for Hogwarts that Luella would need me, and to look after her."

Marlie raised an eyebrow. "You know, DT, you could have made all our lives a lot easier by letting me in on that little piece of information when I asked you back in the first year!"

Deanna squirmed. "Yeah, but we weren't talking, were we? By the time we were, we had other things on our minds, you know?"

"If I can interrupt you all." Luella said meaningfully. "Rianne, I can see you still don't quite believe me. So, in the interests of stopping the arguments..." She produced her wand and concentrated. It was so easy, really. The Slytherin Serpent appeared at once, oozing out of her wand and rearing up so it towered over the other three. Marlie shut her eyes, but to her credit did not scream. Deanna backed away, edgily. Rianne cowered in terror. Luella flicked her wand and the Serpent vanished.

"Find me an ordinary thirteen year old who could do that." said Luella softly.

Slowly, Rianne emerged to look at Luella. "Oh my god." she whispered. "Oh my god, it is you."

"Yes. It's me." Luella sat down again. "And I wanted you all to know that. I didn't want any secrecy, I didn't want any lies, I didn't want you all wondering if it was safe to trust anyone else." She gave them her most penetrating gaze. "He's coming back. I felt it at the Welcome Feast, I felt it yesterday in Quirrell's lesson, I felt it this morning. He's coming back and he knows who I am. And he wants me dead." She felt the enormity of that settle on her again. "I've got the fight of my life, literally the fight of my life, on my hands here. I can't do it alone. I'm going to need all the help I can get. I am going to need you lot. Do you remember when we won the Quidditch Cup in our first year?"

They nodded. Luella continued. "We swore always to be friends and allies on the Great Serpent, to never let our differences come between us, always to help each other. Well, this is it. Let's see what you're made of. I need your support. Your lives are at risk if you do it. Everyone's life is at risk if you don't. But I'm not going to force you into it. I want you with me willingly or not at all. If you don't want in, I won't judge you. If you want out, just leave now. I won't blame you at all. Are you with me or not?" She held her hand out.

Deanna nodded brusquely. "Of course I'm with you." She reached out and took Luella's hand. Luella smiled and turned to Marlie. "Marls?"

Marlie hesitated. Then, she shrugged and placed her own hand over Deanna's. "All right. Count me in."

Deanna grinned at her. Luella smiled knowingly. "Knew you would. Rianne?"

Rianne looked far less certain. She looked from one to the other fearfully. "I don't want to die." she whispered.

"Nor do we." Luella said firmly.

"If Voldemort comes back, we'll be killed anyway." Deanna said quietly. "I'd rather go out fighting."

Rianne hesitated. Then, she too placed her hand on top of the others. "OK." she said quietly. Luella placed her other hand on top of theirs and gripped them tightly, looking into their eyes.

"Eternal, unceasing alliance against Lord Voldemort. Together, forever, on the Great Serpent. Are you with me?"

"On the Great Serpent." they said. Luella released them, sighing with relief.

"All right. Now here comes the strategic bit. Voldemort could well be in the school now. I certainly think he's nearby. But I don't think he's powerful enough to hurt me physically, not yet. He has, however, been attacking me psychically. That's why I collapsed this morning. If it hadn't been for Professor Snape..." She shuddered. "He got me out of there, took me to his office and taught me how to fight back. If it happens again, I'm ready. I might even hit back with a pre-emptive strike of my own. But that's not all I found out. I discovered two other things this morning, which are vital bits of information." She paused, watching them. They were hanging on her every word.

"First, is that Snape knows about me. He's under orders to look after me too. I know he's not universally popular with you all," here Marlie laughed derisively, "but I think you ought to know this. He's on our side. He's trustworthy. He'll help us if we let him. So if we need help from adults, go to him, understand? He's been there before, his mind's riddled with scars from the last Voldemort war. He knows. You don't have to like him, but do trust him."

Deanna rolled her eyes. "If you say so, Lu. Well, Mum's a friend of his, so he can't be all bad. What else?"

"Well, I just told you who we can trust. Here's who we can't. Professor Quirrell."

"Quirrell?" The three of them burst out laughing. Deanna was first to speak.

"Lu, how can Professor Quirrell be dangerous? Look at him. I've seen more intimidating Christmas cards."

"Yeah, that stutter's really frightening." laughed Marlie. "Come on Lu, the only scary thing about Quirrell is that turban with those robes."

Luella shook her head. "Wise up, you lot! That's exactly what he wants you to think. If you don't take him seriously, you don't notice him creeping up behind you, or have him down as an enemy."

"Lu, don't you think you're being just a bit paranoid?" Rianne asked gently. "He's a teacher, he's not going to be working for You-Know-Who, is he?"

"Snape thinks he is. I think so too. Come on, open your eyes! Where did my attack yesterday happen? Quirrell's lesson. Who was nearest to me at breakfast this morning when I had the attack then? Quirrell. When he tried to help me, it got worse, much worse, then stopped as soon as Snape made him leave me alone. And when Snape was

taking me to his office, Quirrell appeared again. And I had another attack, and that time it was the worst it had ever been. It didn't subside until Snape made Quirrell go away. I tell you, he's bad news."

The other three looked at each other. Luella seemed certain, almost fanatically so.

"OK." Deanna said. "We'll believe you. But all the same, Quirrell?"

Luella prepared for Monday's Defence Against the Dark Arts class with a grim feeling of excitement. It would be interesting to face Quirrell again; she'd not seen him since her attack on Saturday morning. Truth be told, she was rather looking forward to it.

So it was with a sense of disappointment that she learned that the lesson had been cancelled.

"Cancelled?" she asked, surprised. "Why?"

Lucas Vetinari shrugged. "Says he's ill, apparently. Should be back for Wednesday's lesson though."

"Oh." Luella said, disappointed. Deanna patted her on the shoulder. "Never mind, Lu. You'll get to demonstrate your anti-Dark Arts prowess eventually. Come on, might as well hit the library while we're waiting."

Luella browsed the Charms section idly. Her three friends were seated at a table around the corner. They were talking in low whispers, and Luella was under no illusions about what they were talking. She'd heard her name mentioned quite a few times. Turning away, her attention was caught by another set of voices behind her.

"Have you found anything yet?" a boy's voice, with a West Country accent rather like Marlie's, hissed in a low whisper.

"No." a girl replied. "Here, you get looking through these, see what comes up."

Luella smiled as she recognised them. Turning around, she saw Hermione Granger pulling some books off the shelf and passing them back to a rather fed up Ron Weasley.

"You two all right there?" she asked good-naturedly.

Ron and Hermione didn't say anything. They just looked back in shock. Hermione was first to recover.

"Hi, Lu." Hermione said gently. "How are you feeling now? Are you all right?"

Luella grinned and shook her head, letting her hair flow out backwards in a move she'd copied from Marlie.

"Never better. See, told you I'd be OK."

Hermione was not convinced. "Yes, but what was up on Saturday? You looked awful."

Luella did some extremely quick thinking. "That? Nothing to worry about. Some of my housemates thought it would be... amusing... to slip a hallucinogen to me without me knowing. Thought I was surrounded by Dementors. Professor Snape took me back to his office to give me the antidote. Rest assured those responsible have been dealt with." She grinned evilly. "Deanna and me got a posse together and kicked their arses into the next county."

Hermione laughed nervously. Ron looked extremely doubtful. Luella hastily changed the subject. "So what are you two after? I don't recall those being on the first year reading list." She indicated the books they were holding. Both Ron and Hermione suddenly started fidgeting and acting very suspiciously. Hermione looked as if she was thinking about what to do. Seeming to make her mind up, she answered first.

"Nothing much, just a little research into magical history. I've got so much to learn about the magical community, I thought I'd do a little background reading. I expect you had all this to do when you were a first year."

Luella smiled. "Yeah, I had a lot to learn. There's still a lot I don't know, even now. Is there anything in particular you wanted to know?"

Ron shot a sharp look at Hermione. Luella noticed immediately and gave her a quizzical look. Tell me, she thought. There's more going on here, isn't there? So tell me.

Hermione decided to speak. "Actually, there was one thing. Nothing really major or anything, I just heard it mentioned in passing and thought you might have heard something about it."

Ron glared at her. "Don't tell her, she might go straight to Snape!" he hissed. Hermione took a deep breath and ignored him.

"Lu, have you ever heard of a wizard called Nicolas Flamel?"

Luella thought hard. The name didn't ring any bells. "No. Sorry. I'll ask Deanna and Rianne for you, if you like. They grew up in magic households, they might have heard of him. Especially Deanna, she knows all sorts of magical history."

Ron held his head in his hands. Hermione smiled. "Thanks, Lu, that'd be really helpful. It's not important or anything, I'm just interested for the sake of it."

Luella smiled gently. "I'll go and ask them now." She turned and went back to the table. Her smile turned to an intrigued look as soon as she was out of sight. So this Nicolas Flamel was important, was he? Got to hand it to Hermione, she was good. Convincing as a Slytherin. Ron, on the other hand, couldn't have been more of a giveaway if he'd tried.

Luella sat down next to Rianne. "Ri, have you ever heard of a wizard called Nicolas Flamel?"

"No. Sorry. Never heard of him. Why?"

"Hermione wanted to know. Marlie, Deanna, either of you know anything?"

Marlie looked blank. Deanna, however, looked like she was thinking hard. "Actually, the name rings a bell. I think I read something about it not long ago. Did she say anything about what he might have done?"

"No, just the name."

"Nicolas Flamel, Nicolas Flamel. Familiar, but I can't think why. Let's see, I'm currently reading Tyler and Croft's *Famous Magicians of the Renaissance*. Co-authored by my great-grandmother, by the way. I'm sure he might have been mentioned..." She sat bolt upright. "Of course! He was in that weird chapter on alchemy that I skipped most of. Now I remember."

"Alchemy?" Luella sounded intrigued. "So what sort of alchemy did he do? Was he any good?"

"I should say so. Only known manufacturer of the Philosopher's Stone. Rumour has it he's still alive today."

"What's a Philosopher's Stone?" Marlie asked curiously.

"Weird alchemist thing used to prepare the Elixir of Life. Which can turn lead into gold and make you immortal." Rianne said matter-of-factly. "So why's Hermione interested in that?"

"You two aren't thinking of having a go at making one, are you?" Deanna grinned.

"Don't be silly, of course we're not." Luella laughed.

"Relieved to hear it. Most alchemists went completely nuts because of all the sulphur and mercury fumes. Hey, reckon Snape's one?" They all laughed.

Luella got up. "Hardly. He's sane enough. Twisted, but sane. Better go and pass the news on to her. See you guys." She headed off into the recesses of the library, her smile fading as soon as she was alone. The Philosopher's Stone? Hadn't Snape mentioned it to Filch the other night? The night they'd tried to investigate the forbidden corridor. Well, now she knew what the dog was guarding. She'd forgotten about that, what with the Voldemort attacks.

Voldemort. Oh hell. He was nearby, working with Quirrell. Her blood ran cold. The Stone could make you immortal. And hadn't she heard Snape asking Quirrell what he'd been doing the night Filch had alerted him to a possible theft?

She stood still, her head in a whirl. It all made sense now. The Stone was being guarded here at Hogwarts, in that corridor, with the dog and probably other things too protecting it. And Quirrell was trying to steal it for Voldemort so he could come back, at least that's what Snape thought. She looked frantically around. Hermione wanted to know about all this? And Ron, and presumably Harry.

Harry. She froze. Another one on the Voldemort hit list. Someone had already tried to kill him once. And Quirrell had been present at the time.

Luella thought briefly. Going to Snape was out of the question; while he'd go out of his way to help her, he'd be far less sympathetic to Gryffindors. However, if she could protect Harry, then she would. Without hesitating, she turned to seek out Hermione.

"Well?" Hermione asked eagerly. "Did you find anything?"

"Nope. Not a sausage. You'll have to keep on looking, won't you?" Luella said abruptly, before leaving a puzzled Hermione and a suspicious Ron behind her.

"So she just said she hadn't found anything and brushed you off, just like that?" Harry said, thoughtfully.

"Yes." said Hermione. "It was really strange, like she just wanted to get rid of me. That's not Luella at all. If she didn't know, she'd have told me more politely. That was more like Snape than Luella. It's like she knows something and doesn't want to discuss it."

"That's not good. Maybe you shouldn't have told her about Flamel." said Harry dubiously.

"Why?" Hermione snapped. "She's older, she's smart, she might have heard something about him! All I did was ask, I didn't tell her why we were looking or anything."

"That's not the point!" Ron said angrily. "Point is, if Snape has got her bewitched, he'll find out we're looking for Flamel and realise we're on to him."

"But he wouldn't bewitch a student, would he?" Hermione asked nervously.

"Who knows? He might have." Harry looked worried. "I mean, look at her. Saturday morning she's a complete wreck. Now she's confident, self-assured, and even Malfoy's walking in fear of her. You saw the four of them come in to breakfast this morning, the other three were flanking her like bodyguards, and Luella was in the middle looking like some kind of Mafia boss. Something's happened to her! And I bet Snape had something to do with it. Now she's given in to him, he's got her under his control and is making her feel braver."

Hermione shook her head. "Well, I still don't believe it. Luella didn't seem bewitched to me. Just very confident and together."

Harry sighed. "Well, it's too late now. We'll just have to hope she doesn't report back to him. If anyone asks, we just heard the name mentioned and were curious. Better, just say you wanted to know, Herm. They'll believe that you'd be researching stuff like that."

By Wednesday, Defence Against the Dark Arts was back on again. Luella glanced casually at Quirrell, who was sitting behind his desk trembling. No change there, then. Still in that daft purple turban, and those green robes. Marlie was absolutely right, they really didn't go.

Luella got her things out as the lesson began. Today, it was how to deal with Grindylows. Dull. Very dull. Luella gazed idly at Quirrell. Why had he been off sick? Did it have something to do with her fight-back on Saturday morning? Had it affected Quirrell that badly? Interesting. Very interesting. He was stuttering more than usual and did look very pale.

Luella smiled cruelly. Maybe she could put this theory to the test. Taking a few deep breaths, she focused her eyes on Quirrell's forehead and concentrated.

So you're the Dark Lord's chosen, are you? I'm surprised.

Quirrell froze. Hastily, he shook himself and continued talking. Luella just smiled and put the pressure on again, borrowing heavily from the kind of thing Snape liked to use on errant Gryffindors.

I must say, I'm rather disappointed. I thought Lord Voldemort had more style than that. What dire straits he must be in to have to choose the likes of you as a follower.

Quirrell's voice trailed off. He was visibly shaking, but Luella noticed something like anger in his eyes. Time to move in for the kill.

Whatever you're planning, it won't succeed, you know that, don't you. I will do whatever it takes to stop you and your master. You will fail him, as you've failed at everything else in your miserable existence, and he will show you no mercy. I will show you no mercy. Save your neck and come over to our side. Surrender!

She gazed straight into his eyes, mentally repeating the last word over and over again, putting every inch of her new-found power into it. Quirrell clutched his head suddenly, staggering back. He looked straight back at her, and this time it was fear not anger in his eyes. The rest of the class were on their feet in shock.

"Sir, are you all right?" Luella heard Lucas Vetinari asking. Luella smiled and broke off contact. Honour was satisfied. For now. Quirrell steadied himself.

"Y-yes, yes, I'm f-fine, V-v-vetin-n-nari." He shook himself. "If you w-would all l-like to s-s-settle d-down, we'll c-contin-n-nue the l-lesson."

Luella, still grinning, picked up her quill and continued taking notes. She noticed Deanna giving her a knowing look and Marlie raising an eyebrow. She winked at them before returning to work.

Last thing on Wednesdays was Potions. Snape generally ignored his students as they filed in, but this time he didn't take his eyes off Luella. She noticed this immediately and smiled at him. He acknowledged her, seeming rather relieved.

Luella took her seat at the back with Deanna and started taking notes on the potion they would be making today. The lesson proceeded smoothly enough, but Luella was constantly aware of Snape's eyes flickering towards her. Strangely, she found the attention rather flattering.

The lesson ended and they filed out. Luella, one of the last to leave, heard Snape's soft tones calling her back. She turned to see what he wanted.

"So how have you been, Miss Martin?" Snape asked coolly. "Have you had any further attacks?"

"None whatsoever. I think they've backed down. Scared of me." she grinned. Snape smiled.

"Well done, I'm impressed. Clearly you've taken my words to heart. You know Professor Quirrell was indisposed the other day?"

"Yeah, we had our lesson cancelled. What was really wrong with him, sir?"

"Alas, I am not privy to that information. However, I believe I can guess. I also noted at lunchtime that Quirrell has not entirely recovered - he'd just had a lesson with one of his third year classes and seemed quite flustered. Were you in that class by any chance?"

"Er... I might have been." Luella grinned.

Snape nodded, unsurprised. "You do learn fast, don't you? I've been watching you all week, I've noticed the change in you. Don't think it hasn't gone unnoticed by my colleagues either, Professor McGonagall asked me only this morning what on earth had happened to you. I told her I'd just given you a few words of advice about asserting yourself and left it at that."

"Is it that obvious?" Luella asked, alarmed.

"Absolutely. Last week, you were the quiet, unobtrusive one of your social circle. Now look at you. The undoubted leader. You're wearing your power like a cloak, and the whole school's noticing. I've heard your fellow students, and you yourself, asking

how on earth you ended up in Slytherin, that maybe you would have been better off in Ravenclaw or even Hufflepuff. I confess to having had doubts myself. No longer! You're walking, talking, looking like a Slytherin. Every move, every look, just says *beware*. And I'm proud of you. Very proud. Twenty points for Slytherin."

Luella blushed, but couldn't stop herself smiling. "Thank you, sir! Of course, I couldn't have done it without you, you know."

"Maybe. But don't underestimate yourself. All I did was show you your power, you are the one who picked it up and used it." He gazed at her, eyes burning fiercely. "Use it well, Luella Martin. Use it well."

Luella returned his gaze proudly, these strange new feelings of delight at his attention surging through her. "You have my word." she said softly. "You have my word."

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Chapter Nine An Unexpected Gift

The days passed swiftly. It was now December, and there was a palpable air of excitement. As if everyone could sense that Christmas was just around the corner.

Which, Luella thought, could only be a good thing. This winter was colder than usual. The lake had frozen solid, snow covered the ground, and there was little chance of owls getting anywhere. Those that did make it required Hagrid's tender ministrations before they could be put back in use.

Luella shivered. It never got this cold in Surrey, never. The Serpent's Nest was warm enough, but classes, especially Snape's, were a frozen nightmare. She had now taken to wearing the warm winter cloak that Mrs. Tyler had given her a few years back underneath her regulation black one.

"How do you manage it?" she hissed at Rianne, who seemed unaffected by the cold.

"I'm from the Welsh mountains, Lu." she replied nonchalantly. "It's always like this during winter."

Marlie, sitting next to her, groaned. "I hate winter." she complained. "Only good things are Christmas and my birthday. And I've just had one of them. Gods, why does this place have to be so perishingly cold? Have they not heard of central heating?"

"Wusses, all of you." Deanna said brusquely. "Come on, we need some action! Warm your soft English blood up. Marlie, you and me, how about a practice Quidditch session?"

Marlie leapt to her feet. "You're on. Let's go!" She ran off to get their brooms and cloaks.

Deanna turned to Luella and Rianne. "Fancy joining us?"

Rianne yawned lazily. "I might. Could do with the exercise."

"What about you, Lu?"

"No way." Luella said firmly. She'd never been at home on a broom, and no one had been gladder than her at the end of their first year, when Flying had ceased to be part of their curriculum. "If we were meant to fly, we'd have had wings. You're not getting me up on one of those things."

Deanna chuckled. "Suit yourself. You can watch. Keep score or something."

So it was that Luella found herself out on the Quidditch pitch, huddled next to a magical fire for warmth, watching Rianne, Marlie and Deanna play the stripped-down three-and-in version of Quidditch, involving two Chasers, one Keeper, one Quaffle,

and no Beaters, Bludgers, Seeker or Snitch. It lacked a certain excitement, Luella thought to herself as her friends flew high above her, Marlie and Deanna tackling each other while Rianne was in goal. Deanna's owl, Spooky, fluttered to perch on her shoulder.

"Hiya, Spooks." she muttered gently. No denying it, Spooky was a cute little owl. Not at all the sort of thing she'd thought Deanna would go for. The small, brown owl chirped gently. Luella grinned to herself.

Her mood was broken by a most unwelcome voice.

"Wearing a blue cloak during school hours, Martin? That's not allowed, you know. We ought to tell Professor Snape about that, oughtn't we?"

Draco. Flanked by Crabbe and Goyle. Luella gritted her teeth.

"It's under my school cloak. And it's half past three. Not school hours anymore, Malfoy, so there." Luella heartily wished he'd go away.

"Talking rather bravely, aren't we, Martin?" Draco grinned. "You don't seem to realise you're outnumbered." In the fading light, Draco obviously hadn't noticed the three girls on brooms.

"Unlike you, Malfoy, I don't need my friends hanging around me as bodyguards in case someone decides to hit me. Now shut up and go away, unless you've got something interesting to say, which I sincerely doubt."

"Ooh!" Draco feigned fear. "Tough words. But can you back them up, Mudblood?"

Luella froze. The world seemed to stand still. From far away, she heard her own voice saying "What did you call me, Malfoy?"

And Draco's voice replying, deadly serious this time. "You heard me, Mudblood."

Luella didn't even hesitate. Before Draco could react, she reached back and punched him for all she was worth.

Draco fell back, stunned that a mere Muggle-born, and a female one at that, could hit so hard.

"What are you waiting for?" he hissed at Crabbe and Goyle, nursing his jaw. "Get her!"

Luella drew out her wand, ready for a fight. Spooky took to the air and began hooting madly, flying around in circles. Crabbe and Goyle advanced menacingly. They were cut short, however, by a Quaffle thrown at Crabbe's head. All of them turned to see where it had come from.

Deanna, Marlie and Rianne had evidently noticed what was going on, and were now bringing their brooms in. All three had their wands out.

"Leave her alone, Malfoy." Deanna called out threateningly.

Draco pulled himself to his feet, drawing his wand.

"Or you'll do what, Tyler?" he snarled.

"This." she said coolly, letting a hex go at him. Draco leapt aside, and let one fly back. Deanna dodged with ease. Spooky, however, had other ideas. Flying to the defence of his mistress, he went straight for Draco and began beating him in the face with his wings.

"Spooky, leave him, you'll get me in trouble!" Deanna shouted, shocked. Crabbe and Goyle immediately tried to go to Draco's aid, but he waved them off.

"Leave it, I can deal with this!" he snarled, before reaching out and grabbing Spooky round the throat. Squeezing the little bird hard he threw it back at Deanna. Spooky hit the frozen ground with a sickening thump. He fluttered briefly before lying still.

Deanna touched down next to the fallen owl and examined him. Marlie and Rianne joined her, stunned. Luella ran to see what had happened.

Rianne picked the owl up. "He's not moving. This doesn't look good."

"My owl, Malfoy." Deanna whispered furiously. "If you've killed my owl...!"

Draco, for once, looked genuinely shocked. "Killed him? I didn't mean to kill him!" He turned swiftly to Crabbe and Goyle. "Let's go. Quickly!" The three boys ran off back to the school, leaving the girls clustered around Spooky's limp form.

"You're doing Care of Magical Creatures, what do you think?" Luella asked Marlie in a hushed voice.

"Get him to Hagrid at once." Marlie said firmly. "There's no one knows more about animals than him."

However, it proved too late for the owl. Hagrid, after examining him carefully, apologised but said there was nothing he could do. The owl's neck was broken and it seemed kinder to put it out of its misery. Deanna assented numbly, and the four of them headed back, leaving Hagrid to get on with it.

Deanna didn't say much all evening, just sitting quietly on her own. There was, however, one benefit. Draco, while not exactly apologising, did evidently feel guilty about what had happened, and left them alone. He didn't even give them the usual condescending looks.

By bedtime, the shock seemed to have worn off. Deanna went to bed early, drew the curtains shut and didn't say anything to anybody. Luella, in the next bed, heard her crying softly that night, but didn't intervene. She debated briefly whether to ask Snape

for some more sleeping potion, but decided against it. Snape, while sympathetic to nightmares about Deanna's mother being tortured by Death Eaters, was unlikely to feel quite the same way about the death of an owl. Nor did Luella really feel like letting Deanna know she'd heard her crying. In the end, she decided to let her retain some shreds of dignity if nothing else, and went to sleep.

Rianne tried to persuade Deanna to get up the next morning.

"Come on, Deanna, we've got class. You'll get in trouble!"

"I'm not going." a muffled voice came from behind the curtains.

"Deanna, we've got Potions first thing!" Rianne said urgently. "How sympathetic do you think Snape's going to be?"

"I don't care. Not about Snape, not about anything else. I'm not going."

Rianne, exasperated, turned to Marlie and Luella. "Can you two do anything?"

Luella stepped forward. "Come on, Deanna. Come out. Show Malfoy he's not getting to you."

"Screw Malfoy." Deanna snapped bitterly. "Screw Snape. Screw the world. Just leave me alone."

Luella turned to the other two. "Come on, we'd better get a move on. No use trying to reason with her like this."

Snape noticed Deanna's absence almost immediately.

"Where is Miss Tyler today?" he said, irritably, looking sternly at Luella.

Luella looked helplessly at Marlie and Rianne, who just shrugged. Luella decided to try bluffing.

"She's not well." she said promptly.

"Not well?" Snape said disbelievingly. "She seemed perfectly healthy yesterday. And I don't believe I've seen her in the hospital wing."

Marlie chipped in. "She's a bit upset, sir. Suffered a bereavement recently."

Snape seemed to go pale. "A bereavement? Most of her family's dead. Who?"

Luella watched closely, thinking that it was a good thing Snape was sitting down, he looked like he was about to faint. It occurred to her that Deanna's only living relative was her mother. Which made Snape's shocked reaction... interesting.

"Draco Malfoy fatally injured her owl, sir." Rianne said levelly. Snape seemed to calm down at this. In fact, he now looked highly annoyed.

"Indeed." he said coldly. "Well, great as her grief must no doubt be, that is no excuse for missing my lesson. Tell her I will see her at the end of the school day." And with that, the subject seemed to be closed.

Deanna appeared to have regained her composure by lunch, and attended her afternoon Divination class as normal.

"Can't hide from the world forever." Deanna told Luella, trying to sound cheerful.

"Anyway, I wouldn't miss Trelawney's lessons for the world. Funniest thing in the school. I'm learning so much about how to con people, it's amazing."

"Deanna, you're meant to be uncovering your natural predictive abilities, not learning how to pull confidence tricks." Rianne said disapprovingly.

"If Trelawney had any natural predictive abilities, she'd be able to teach them to me, but as it is, I'll just have to content myself with scamming." Deanna said coolly.

"Talking of fast talking, you'll need it. Snape wants to see you at the end of the day. Wants to know why you missed his lesson." Luella told her.

"Oh hell." Deanna said, frustrated. "What did you tell him?"

"The truth." Rianne said firmly. "What else?"

"Oh gods." Deanna moaned. "What's wrong with you people? Why couldn't you have lied?"

"We tried." Marlie pointed out. "I did tell him you'd suffered a bereavement, but he would insist on knowing who it was."

"Bloody hell." Deanna grumbled. "Oh well, the worst he can do is give me detention. Come on, you two. Divination. See you, Ri. I predict at least one of your classmates will fall asleep during Muggle Studies."

"That always happens." Rianne laughed. "Nostradamus you are not."

Divination passed all too quickly, and Deanna found herself waiting outside Snape's classroom all too soon. Marlie and Luella wished her luck, before disappearing off to the common room.

Snape's fourth year class filed out, and Deanna slipped in. Snape was sitting at his desk, gathering assignments together.

"You wanted to see me, sir?" she said, nervously. Snape gave her his most withering look.

"To be brutally honest, Miss Tyler, I would far rather have seen you this morning in my Potions class. What was so vitally important as to keep you away? Do tell me, it must have been riveting to have commanded you away from one of my lessons." Snape's voice dripped sarcasm.

"Sorry, sir." she mumbled. "I won't do it again."

"You still haven't told me where you were. I'm waiting, Miss Tyler."

"I didn't feel up to it, sir. Malfoy killed my owl yesterday, I couldn't face lessons."

"Indeed. Well, I shall have words with Mr. Malfoy's parents at a later date. Maybe some form of compensation can be arranged. However, that does not give you an excuse to miss lessons. Ten points from Slytherin, Miss Tyler. I shall expect you to have caught up on the work missed. I am sure Miss Martin or Miss Stormosi will be pleased to assist you. Now go."

"So he just took ten points off you, told you to catch up and that was it?" Rianne asked, open-mouthed.

"He was very sarcastic, if that makes any difference." Deanna volunteered. "In fact, he was verging on irony."

Marlie and Luella both winced. A verbal lashing from Snape was worth thirty points lost and a detention from anyone else.

"Well, I still think he was a bit soft on you." Rianne sniffed. "By his standards anyway."

Finally, term ended and the Christmas holidays began. As the four Slytherins staggered off the Hogwarts Express and onto Platform Nine and Three Quarters, Marlie gathered them all together to finalise arrangements for the holidays.

"Right, now you will all come round ours for our Christmas soiree, won't you?" Marlie said forcefully.

"Course we will." Deanna assured her. "Mum's going, so I can't really say no, can I? Lu, you're invited as well, Mum told me to tell you. Come round our house, we're going by Floo. Same time as usual, Marls?"

"As usual. Ri, you and Kat coming?" Marlie asked.

"Try keeping us away. I suppose your mum will have invited the Weasleys along?"

"Not this year, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley are in Egypt with Bill and their youngest Ginny, Charlie's in Romania, the rest of the boys are still at Hogwarts. Not the usual banquet, I'm afraid." Marlie sighed.

"All the more for us then." Deanna said, unconcerned. "And no Fred and George to keep an eye on, yippee!"

As the two girls climbed into the back of the Martins' Volvo, Mrs. Martin turned to greet them warmly.

"How was school then, dears?"

"Could have been better." Deanna sighed. "Gryffindor have got a new Seeker for their team and we got thrashed, and my owl's died, but apart from that, fine."

Mrs. Tyler, seated in the front passenger seat, turned to look at her exasperatedly. "Deanna, I've told you time and time again to take better care of your pets! What happened?"

"It wasn't her fault, Mrs. Tyler." Luella said softly. "Spooky got injured by another student."

"Which one?" Mrs. Tyler asked.

"Draco Malfoy." the two girls said in unison.

"Who?" Mrs. Martin asked in confusion.

"Draco Malfoy. Yes, that is his real name." Mrs. Tyler said, amused. "The Malfoys are an old and well-known magical family. I gather Draco and Deanna don't get on very well. Deanna, why did he go for your owl? If it's his fault, I'll see if I can get compensation off his father. Goodness knows he can afford it."

"Spooky attacked him after he tried to hex me. Malfoy hit back and accidentally killed him."

Mrs. Tyler immediately looked stern. "Deanna, I hope you weren't getting in fights again."

"He called Luella a Mudblood, mum! What was I meant to do?"

"He called her what? Never mind." Mrs. Tyler said hastily. "We'll talk later. Sorry about that, Celia." She smiled at Mrs. Martin, who was looking rather bemused. "Deanna's temper, always getting her in trouble. Although from what I've heard of Malfoy, he does like to provoke her. Still, no harm done."

"I should hope not." Mrs. Martin said stiffly. "Luella, I hope you've been behaving yourself."

"Of course I have!" Luella said innocently, deciding not to mention punching Draco or exploring out-of-bounds corridors. Or, for that matter, fighting a troll. Or psychically attacking teachers. Deanna grinned at her, clearly remembering all four incidents. Luella decided to change the subject. "Mum, can I go over to Marlie's on Christmas Day?"

"What time?" her mother asked.

"Four o'clock." Deanna told her. "We'll take her, no problems there."

"But if she lives in Devon and you're leaving at four..." Mrs. Martin sounded troubled.

Mrs. Tyler smiled. "We've got ways of getting there and back. Luella will be back at a reasonable hour. They've got a phone too, you can call if there's any trouble."

"I like Marlie's house." Deanna said reflectively. "Mum, can we have a phone?"

"You don't need one, dear." Mrs. Tyler said firmly. Deanna sulked, but did not press the point.

"Now, you will behave, won't you dear?" Mrs. Martin asked Luella anxiously as she got ready to leave.

"Yes, Mum."

"And you will phone us if there's a problem?"

"Yes, Mum."

"And you will be back by ten o'clock, won't you?"

"Yes, Mum. Don't fuss, I'm only going to Marlie's. Her mum runs the DDAE, it's the safest house in the country." Luella said irritably as she pulled her coat on.

"What's the DDAE, then?" her father asked.

"Department of Dark Arts Eradication. Magic police force. Mrs. Tyler works for them."

"Sounds rather Orwellian." Mr. Martin remarked. "Are you sure you'll be alright? Don't want you coming home brainwashed."

"Oh, Dad. You're being paranoid. They're a perfectly nice family. You've met Marlie, haven't you? Does she seem brainwashed to you?"

Mr. Martin looked as if he were going to make a less than flattering comment about her, but a look from Mrs. Martin stopped him.

"Ignore him, dear, he's just fed up because we have to attend that wretched party at the Dursleys."

"Can't you tell them you're not going?" Luella asked. The Dursleys were neighbours of theirs, and Vernon Dursley was one of her father's main clients, hence the need to attend their parties. Luella had not been to their house often, but she'd been bored every time. For some reason, the Dursleys didn't seem to like her, although that could be because of all the fights she and Deanna had got in with their son Dudley. Not to mention one memorable occasion when she'd managed to make the dinner table collapse. She'd not been back since. "Come to the Lovegoods' instead. Marlie's dad's Muggle too, you won't feel too out of place. They've got a TV and a stereo and everything."

Mrs. Martin sighed. "Not that simple, dear. You run along, have fun at your party. Give our love to all your friends. And remember, no using magic!"

"I know." Luella sighed. "Anyway, I've got the head of the DDAE watching my every move, I'm not likely to, am I?"

Her parents looked sceptical but did not push the point. Luella said goodbye, and headed off to Deanna's.

Deanna waved as Luella entered their front room.

"Hello! All set for an evening of fun, frolics and feasting?"

"Absolutely. I've been looking forward to this for ages. I've not been before."

"Such bad luck you had flu last year. Never mind. You managed to avoid Fred and George's Homing Mistletoe, which can only be a good thing. Mind you, you also missed Marlie kneeing Fred in the groin after he sent it after her once too often." Deanna grinned.

Luella was spared answering by Mrs. Tyler's entrance. She looked stunning, in a blue velvet dress that offset her honey-coloured hair and brown eyes magnificently.

"Hi, Luella!" she smiled warmly. "Merry Christmas! How've you been?"

"Merry Christmas, Mrs. Tyler." Luella said automatically. "You look very smart."

"Ah well, I do like to dress up for these things. Looking forward to the party?"

"Too right. Well, the alternatives are an afternoon on my own or a visit to these clients of Dad's."

"Is FBD still as fat as he used to be?" Deanna grinned.

"According to Mum, fatter. She's always complaining about how Vernon and Petunia spoil that boy."

Mrs. Tyler changed from motherly to alert in an instant. "Vernon and Petunia?" she said sharply.

"The Dursleys. Live round the corner in Privet Drive. With their awful son, Dudley. You must remember them, Deanna got in trouble for allegedly attacking him once."

"Oh, I remember them alright." Mrs. Tyler said softly. "So just the three of them, the parents and their son?"

"As far as I know. Dad reckons they did have a nephew, but he's a bit funny in the head, apparently. No one sees much of him. Spends most of the year at some kind of institution. Mum keeps saying what a shame it is about him. Mrs. Tyler, is something wrong, wait a second. A nephew living with them?" It dawned on Luella who the Dursleys' mysterious nephew was. "*Harry?*"

Mrs. Tyler had gone very pale and tight-lipped. "You guess correctly." she said firmly.

Deanna looked stunned. "They said that? About Harry Potter? *Weak in the head?* Some kind of *institution?* Now wait a minute, that's my school they're talking about!"

Mrs. Tyler seemed deeply grieved. "Children, you know all about how certain mages look down on certain other mages of Muggle origins, and indeed the Muggles themselves. Well, there are some Muggles who deserve the prejudice. Muggles who hate anything different from themselves, anything they can't understand, and whose instinctive reaction is to crush it before it grows. And I'm very much afraid the Dursleys are among them."

"Is there nothing you can do?" Luella whispered. "You're an Auror, there must be something."

Mrs. Tyler shook her head. "No. Trust me, I've tried. But he's living with a Muggle family, there's no Dark magic being used, they're his legal guardians and the Ministry doesn't want to get involved. Many times I've thought of intervening, but there's nothing I can do. The Muggle establishment's no use either, the Dursleys are too well respected. They'd wriggle their way out of it somehow and I fear for what they'd do to Harry afterwards." She looked gently at both girls and was back in her charming, motherly mode again. "You know, girls, I know you may not think much of the families you ended up in sometimes. No, don't protest, I've heard you two talking about how you'd like to swap parents before now. But this I tell you, you've got your own parents to look after you and love you like no one else ever will. You two are

both very fortunate indeed, that you've got parents who accept you just the way you are. I don't think you know how lucky you are, sometimes." Mrs. Tyler looked saddened. Luella looked at her with concern. Deanna, however, responded with her usual emotional sensitivity.

"Not that lucky. Luella's parents nearly didn't let her go to Hogwarts. And I'd like to have seen your reaction if I'd turned out to be a Squib." she laughed.

Mrs. Tyler smiled. "I'd still have loved you anyway. Besides, you're not a Squib, are you? And as for Luella, her parents don't seem to mind anymore. They're letting her go to this party at Mel's, which is more than the Dursleys would have done. But I digress. Deanna, is the fire ready?"

"Roaring away nicely. Got the Floo powder?"

"Right here." Mrs. Tyler produced a bowl of green Floo powder. Luella groaned inwardly. The Floo network was the magical equivalent of public transport, and just about the only way to get anywhere if you couldn't Apparate yet. This had not endeared it in anyway to Luella, who still couldn't get used to the idea of walking into a roaring furnace of naked flames. Mrs. Tyler threw a handful of powder into the fire, turning it green. "You first, Deanna."

Deanna got up, her black velvet robes rustling as she did so. Luella blinked in surprise. Deanna normally wore Muggle clothes at home. Clearly this was an occasion for dressing up witchy style. She began to wish she'd worn something a little smarter than jeans and a black t-shirt with denim shirt. Even if they were her best jeans. Deanna stepped confidently into the green flames and called out "Lovegood Farm, Chudley." She disappeared in a flash. Mrs. Tyler smiled encouragingly at Luella and held out the Floo powder. Gulping, Luella took a handful and cast it into the fire. Closing her eyes, she stepped into the dancing flames, feeling them warm against her skin. She took a deep breath and went for it. "Lovegood Farm, Chudley!"

The Tyler house vanished. She found herself swept along what seemed like a passageway, glimpsing lots of fires off to the side with Christmas scenes in each one. She was flung around corners, first left, then right, then left again, then a long straight passage for what seemed like forever. Suddenly, a light loomed up in the distance, growing steadily larger. She was flung into it at speed and the world went black.

Rubbing her eyes, she stumbled forward. Hands grasped her and supported her. Blinking, she gazed around her as the world swam into focus.

"Not the world's best traveller, are you, Lu?" Deanna commented knowingly. Luella looked up into Deanna's laughing black eyes. On her other side, Mrs. Lovegood helped her get to her feet.

"Leave her alone, Deanna, she's only been using the Floo for two years. She'll get used to it soon, I'm sure. How are you, dear?"

"Fine, thanks." Luella gasped as she steadied herself. "Hello, Mrs. Lovegood."

"Hello, and Merry Christmas! You've not seen our house decorated before, have you?"

Luella looked around at what she recognised as the Lovegood's music room. While the Lovegood house was no mansion by any means, it was an old farmhouse with lots of extensions and outbuildings which had been attached to the main building, all of which gave it the impression of being far bigger than it actually was. Luella thought it was the best house she'd ever been in. Made even better by the Lovegoods' extravagant Christmas decorations, a bizarre combination of the best that the magic and Muggle worlds had to offer. Luella thought it resembled a cross between Harrods and a Victorian Christmas card.

"It's gorgeous!" she breathed. "It looks amazing."

"You've not seen the outside yet. Looks like Cinderella's Castle as decorated by someone with no taste. Visible from Wales. Aeroplanes are having to divert their flight paths because the light keeps distracting the pilots. I'm amazed the council, never mind the Ministry, haven't been onto us yet." Marlie said, watching from the doorway in amusement. Luella noticed with dismay that she too was decked out in purple robes which set off her white-blond hair marvellously.

"Another one in robes. Marlie, is there nothing that doesn't suit you?"

Marlie thought for a moment. "Yellow. And white. And beige. Better dead than wearing khaki. That's about it. Merry Christmas, by the way. How are you both?"

Rianne stuck her head over Marlie's shoulder. She too was in robes, dark green in her case. "You made it then. Come on in, save me from Marlie's dad. Some idiot gave him a camcorder for Christmas."

Mrs. Lovegood glanced up. A swooshing noise from the fire announced Mrs. Tyler's arrival. "Caitlin! Lovely to see you again, how was your journey?"

"No trouble at all, thank you. And how are you and Leonard keeping?"

"We're absolutely fine."

Luella heard Mrs. Tyler lowering her voice. "So, is Severus invited?" Luella immediately wandered a little closer, intrigued.

"I asked him. He declined. Why, Caitlin, is that disappointment I see in your eyes?"

"No." Mrs. Tyler said, just a little too firmly. "So, Mel, tell me what you've got planned for us tonight."

Luella moved away again, feeling a little disappointed herself. While the two women were exchanging the usual seasonal pleasantries, Marlie recalled her role as daughter of the hostess and passed round a tray of nibbles.

"Vol-au-vents, anyone?"

Deanna took one, eyebrow raised. "Vol-au-vents? Marlie, they're cheese and pineapple cubes on cocktail sticks. In a foil-covered jacket potato carved to look like a hedgehog. Haute cuisine they are not."

Marlie looked rather offended. "I spent ages on that potato. Look, do you want one or not?"

Luella took one. "They may not be French, but they'll do me. Nice potato, by the way."

Marlie's brother, unofficial Slytherin heart-throb Mike Lovegood, stuck his head round the door. "Hey, you four, fancy a game of Monopoly? Slytherin style, of course."

"Count me in!" Deanna yelled.

"And me!" Rianne called out.

"I don't know, I might leave you lot to it. Let you get on with your scheming and double-dealing in peace." Luella said. Slytherin Monopoly generally involved more corruption, double-crossing and dirty tricks than a US election.

"Be miserable if you will, then." Mike shrugged. "Hey, that leaves a piece available, if it's just me, Marlie, Kat, Rianne and Deanna. Mum, want to join in?"

"Oh, very well. After all, it is Christmas." Mrs. Lovegood followed them out. Mrs. Tyler watched them go out and turned to Luella. Her smile faded a little.

"Luella, can we talk?"

Luella, her heart sinking, nodded. She could guess what this would be about. Mrs. Tyler led her off into one of the Lovegood's numerous side rooms and sat down on a couch, closing the door behind her. On the other side of the door, Luella heard the first cry of outrage as one of the Monopoly players got mercilessly knifed in the back by another.

"Mum! You're fixing the dice again! Stop it! Dad, tell her!"

"Mel, stop cheating your own children. It's only a game."

"It is not only a game. It's preparation for life. Leonard, put that camcorder thing down. It's off-putting- oh! Thanks, Leonard, you've just let Deanna escape from one of my properties without paying rent."

"Preparation for life, Auntie Mel. Like you said."

Mrs. Tyler smiled benevolently, listening to them argue. "Reminds me of when we used to play Monopoly at school. Mel frequently won then too. Unless Severus was playing. I remember one memorable occasion when a game went on for three days after everyone else had been wiped out, just those two trying to outdo each other."

Can't remember who won." Nostalgia turned to mild concern. "So. Severus tells me you've had an interesting time this term."

Luella shuffled uneasily. "That's one way of putting it. Mrs. Tyler, is it true? Is You-Know-Who, I mean, is Voldemort really coming back?"

Mrs. Tyler sighed sorrowfully. "I don't know, Luella. It's a possibility, but as yet we've no real proof. At least, not until recently." She fixed Luella with a piercing stare. "So is it true what Severus tells me? Were you really under psychic attack?"

Luella nodded. "Certainly felt like it. And..." she looked up. "I think it was him. Voldemort."

"I was afraid of that." Mrs. Tyler sighed. "I've spent the last few weeks hoping and praying to every god there is, that it wasn't true. But I hear you resisted quite well. Indeed, I'm told you even fought back."

Luella grinned, relishing the memory. "Oh yes. And it felt good."

"Excellent. We'll make a Slytherin of you yet. You've certainly made an impression on Severus, he seemed quite pleased with you."

Luella felt her heart skip a beat. "Was he? Really?"

"Oh yes." Mrs. Tyler smiled. "Kept going on about how we couldn't lose, not now we had you on side. He's proud of you. Very proud. I think it's his paternal instincts, they've nowhere else to go. So. Do you trust him now?"

Luella nodded, eyes shining. "Absolutely. He's on our side, isn't he?"

"Of course he is. And I can't believe you would think otherwise. He was very hurt after your confrontation at Halloween."

Luella's jaw dropped. "You know about that?"

"Of course I know. It's my job to know these things. Severus told me. He tells me just about everything that's going on at Hogwarts, especially where it concerns you and Deanna."

"Oh god." Luella said quietly. "Everything?"

"Everything he knows about." Mrs. Tyler said meaningfully. She lowered her voice. "Luella, is Deanna really having nightmares?" she asked fearfully.

Luella gulped. On the one hand, she didn't want to worry Mrs. Tyler. On the other, she certainly didn't want to have to admit the truth.

"Er, not really. Not any more. I think it was just the once." Luella said hastily.

"Good." Mrs. Tyler said, relieved. "I've put that poor child through enough, I couldn't bear the thought... Anyhow. Severus and I have been told by Mel to keep an eye on you, protect you and give any assistance we can in doing what you have to. He's looking after you at school, I'm checking up on you during the holidays, and we've been told to work together and keep each other informed so we know what's going on. Luella, I want you to know that if you have any problems, if you ever need help, that we're here for you. I'm only over the road, and while you're on holiday, you're my top priority. And Severus will drop anything he's doing if you need him. Don't ever think that you're alone in this, Luella. You have allies. Do you understand me?"

Luella nodded. Impulsively, she reached out and hugged Mrs. Tyler. "Thanks. You know, I wish you were my mum sometimes. I get on far better with you than I do with mine."

Mrs. Tyler laughed. "Ah, Luella, you'd change your mind if I actually was! Kids, you always prefer your friends' families to your own, don't you?"

Luella laughed. However, this mention of her friends' families reminded her of something. Something she'd meant to ask her. Something about...

"Mrs. Tyler," she began, "did Professor Snape ever..."

Mrs. Tyler waited patiently. Luella hesitated then plunged in regardless.

"Did he ever work for Voldemort? When he was younger?"

Mrs. Tyler immediately went very tight-lipped, and Luella knew she'd hit very close to the truth.

"You don't need to know about his past, Luella. All you need to know is that since Voldemort fell, and before, he's been a trusted ally, and will continue to be one. Look, one day, I'll tell you everything you ever wanted to know about Severus Snape. But not yet. Not yet."

Luella nodded. "But he's definitely working for us now?"

"Well, of course he is. Didn't I just tell you Mel wants him watching over you?"

"Is he doing anything else for her?"

"Like what? Luella, even if he is, it's not a concern of yours, is it now?"

Luella decided to plunge in and ask the question on her mind. "Mrs. Tyler, is he watching over the Philosopher's Stone?"

Mrs. Tyler lost all her usual warmth in an instant. "Keep your voice down, child!" she hissed. "That's top secret, ultra-classified information, how on earth did you find out about that?"

"Overheard Snape mention it to Filch. And worked out why I could feel Voldemort around once I found out what it was. He's after it, isn't he? Him and Quirrell. He wants it so he can become immortal and take over again, doesn't he?"

"Great Mother, child, is there anything you don't know? Well, for Hera's sake keep quiet about it. And stay out of things. It's far too dangerous for you to be involved. Just let Severus and I get on with our jobs."

Luella was prevented from saying anything else by Marlie's sudden entrance. "Alright in there, you two? Come and join the rest of us, socialise. The game turned a bit nasty after Mike and Deanna were exposed as having formed an alliance against the rest of us, then Mum managed to somehow set up this brilliant move which simultaneously bankrupted all five of us. I'm sure she cheats, you know. Anyway, we're handing round the presents now so if you want yours, come and get 'em!"

Mrs. Tyler, seemingly glad of an excuse to cut that particular conversation short, steered Luella back into the main room, where everyone else was handing around parcels.

The gift-giving went on for some time, what with everyone having brought at least five presents each, and in some cases more. Finally, everyone appeared to have given out everything to everybody.

Mrs. Lovegood sat back with a sigh. "I think that's everything. Alright, now that everyone has all their wonderful new toys, why don't we go and sample the wonderful buffet that Sukey's laid on for us?"

They were interrupted by a tapping at the window. Mrs. Lovegood tutted irritably.

"Who on earth is owling us on Christmas Day? And why hasn't the owl gone to our Owlery? Marlie, go and see who it's from."

Marlie did so, shrieking in shock as she opened the window. For it was no owl that had come to them.

"What on earth...?" Mrs. Lovegood gasped as what looked to Luella's untrained eyes like a bird of prey swooped majestically across the room to land squarely on Deanna's shoulder. Clutched in its talons was a roll of parchment which the stunned girl took.

"What is it, Mum?" Mike asked in awe. "And can I have one?"

"It's a peregrine falcon, and no you cannot. They're a nightmare to train and cost a fortune. You'd have to be a Birdmaster to own one." Mrs. Lovegood snapped. "Caitlin, do you know what this is about?"

Mrs. Tyler grinned. "Maybe. Although I can't say for certain. What's in your letter, Deanna?"

Deanna unfurled her parchment and gasped. "Oh my god! Lu, take a look at that!"

Luella took it from her and read. Behind her, everyone else crowded round to take a look.

The letter was as follows:

Dear Miss Tyler,

As promised, your replacement post bird. Happily, Mr. Malfoy Snr. agreed to pay a sizeable amount of compensation for the loss of your previous pet, allowing me to acquire something rather more special than a mere owl. You always did seem like the type of person who likes to stand out from the crowd. This will most certainly ensure you do just that. Her name is Clytemnestra, but she answers to Nestra. She's only a couple of years old, so you will have the pleasure of her well into your adult life. I doubt even Mr. Malfoy will dare to raise a hand to this fine creature.

I hope this will go some way towards making up for the loss of your previous familiar.

Seasons Greetings,

Professor Snape

PS. Don't worry about bringing her to Hogwarts. Professor Dumbledore has given special permission for you to have her.

"Snape sent you a *peregrine falcon*?" Marlie gasped. "Blimey, Deanna, what did you do to get in his good books?"

Mrs. Lovegood was open-mouthed. "Caitlin, how did Severus manage to afford one of them? I very much doubt Lucius sent two hundred Galleons by way of compensation."

Mrs. Tyler smiled. "Did you not know Severus can talk to birds? Granted he gets his best results with ravens, but I'm sure he's capable of taming a falcon if needs be."

"Professor Snape went to all that trouble over you?" Rianne gasped, amazed. "Wow, Deanna, he must really like you!"

"If you're really nice to me, I might ask him to get you one." Deanna grinned. "Wow, a peregrine falcon. She's so gorgeous! Aren't you, Nestra, eh? You're a beautiful bird, aren't you?"

Clytemnestra flapped her wings and called out. Settling down, she began nuzzling Deanna's ear.

"She likes you, Deanna." Mrs. Tyler smiled.

"You reckon?" Deanna sighed hopefully. "Oh, I so hope I can train her! She's magnificent!"

"Yes, well." Mrs. Lovegood said somewhat tetchily. "Why don't you send her up to our Owlery to rest and feed for a while before she makes the journey back to your house. You can't take her via Floo powder, after all."

"Alright then." Deanna said reluctantly, clearly unwilling to part with such a fine animal. Taking Nesta back to the open window, she whispered to the falcon, "You heard that? Fly up to the Owlery, there's food and things there. Then go straight back to my house in Surrey. You wouldn't like the Floo. OK? See you soon, Nesta."

The bird took off into the darkness. Deanna closed the window and returned to join the others, who were all talking excitedly about how Deanna would be the talk of Hogwarts. Only Luella remained silent. The gift of a falcon went far beyond what was expected of Snape as a teacher. She looked at Deanna with a lump of fear in her stomach. It's not true, she thought, it can't be. But that gift was the final piece in the jigsaw. Deanna was Professor Snape's child. Luella hung her head. While Snape was almost certainly on their side now, it obviously hadn't always been that way. Luella glanced at Deanna, overjoyed at her new present and boasting about how sick Malfoy was going to be when he saw her. Please, please, she thought, don't warm to him, Dee! Don't get too close. Or you're going to get so very, very hurt...

Their return to Hogwarts found them in a much better mood than when they left it. It wasn't long before word got out that Deanna Tyler had acquired a peregrine falcon, and soon the entire house wanted to see it. Deanna, never one to resist showing off, took to giving demonstrations on the Quidditch pitch, which Nesta seemed to revel in as much as her owner did.

It was only a few days into the term. Deanna had taken Nesta for an exercise session. Rianne and Luella, their eyes glued to the sky despite the cold, watched in awe as Nesta executed flying moves worthy of a Seeker. Marlie, eager to show off, had fetched her broom from her dorm and joined her, girl and falcon in a stunning aerobatic display.

Luella had to admit, it was an impressive sight. Despite Mrs. Lovegood's warning that they were near impossible to train, Nesta had taken to Deanna immediately. Most of the holidays had been spent taking her on Epsom Downs for flying sessions. Luella recalled watching the falcon soaring high above them, diving and banking marvellously, dodging in and out of the kites and model aeroplanes that were the more usual inhabitants of the sky above the Downs before gliding in to land on Deanna's outstretched wrist. It was really rather surprising how well they'd bonded. Nesta seemed to understand every word Deanna said to her, always came when called, and needed no jesses, hood or leash to stay near her mistress. In fact, Nesta seemed content to spend most of her time perched on Deanna's shoulder when not delivering messages or hunting.

"Blimey, Tyler, what on earth have you got there?" Fred Weasley's awed voice came from behind them. The Weasley twins were standing there and had been watching for some time.

"Hey, Weasleys." Deanna grinned. "Like my new messenger bird? Nestra the peregrine falcon. Christmas present."

"I'll say." George whispered, impressed. "Those things cost a fortune, who died and left you that much?"

"And how'd you train it?" Fred asked in amazement. "How long did it take to teach her to do that?" Marlie had tossed a borrowed Golden Snitch into the air, which Nestra had caught almost immediately.

Deanna coughed. "Oh, erm, ages. Yeah. Really tough, but Nestra's very intelligent and we bond so well, its unbelievable."

"Well, we are jealous and outraged that you managed to get one. And when we're millionaires, we're buying three of them." said George.

"When you're millionaires?" Rianne raised an eyebrow. "You are ambitious. Thought that was meant to be our territory."

"Yeah, you'd better watch it, or they might make you transfer." Luella teased.

"Never." Fred grinned. "If they tried to put us in Slytherin, we'd leave."

"If they tried to put you in Slytherin, so would we." Deanna responded.

"Ooh, touche, Tyler." grinned George. "And on that note, we'll leave you to your little Air Fair. See you in Potions." The twins took themselves off.

Their next visitors, however, were far less welcome. Draco, Crabbe and Goyle slunk over to see what was going on.

"Lovegood's risking her neck a bit, isn't she?" Draco drawled. "We don't want her to have an accident, we won't win the Cup without her. Although if she makes a habit out of helping other Seekers to the Snitch..."

"She'll be fine." Deanna said shortly. "She knows what she's doing. Malfoy, unless you have something to tell me, stop interrupting. I'm trying to exercise my new messenger bird."

Draco noticed the falcon, and his pale face flushed with jealousy. "That's a peregrine falcon, Tyler. I wasn't aware we were allowed to bring them to school. A cat or a toad or an owl, it said in my Hogwarts letter."

Deanna turned to glare coldly at him. "Well, my original familiar was an owl, wasn't he? But seeing as someone killed my last bird," she gave Draco her coldest look yet, causing him to squirm and look away, "I've been allowed to acquire a new, rather more unique one."

Draco opened his mouth to reply, but never got the chance. Professor Snape's silky tones cut through the January air.

"I see your new familiar is causing quite a stir, Miss Tyler."

They turned. Professor Snape was watching Marlie and Nestra chase each other across the sky. He wasn't exactly smiling, but the ghost of amusement played over his features.

Draco spoke up first. "Sir, she's got a peregrine falcon. We're not allowed them, sir. Are you going to confiscate it?"

Snape slowly lowered his eyes to meet Draco's. The boy shrank back.

"Given that it is thanks to your efforts that Miss Tyler no longer has an owl, I hardly think you are in any position to pass judgement on what she chooses to replace it with. As a matter of fact, Professor Dumbledore has given permission for her to have a falcon, on condition it does not accompany her to class and lives in the Owlery. Now. Don't you have schoolwork to be getting on with?"

Draco muttered something and slunk off, Crabbe and Goyle in tow. Snape returned to gazing at Nestra.

"She appears to respond well to Miss Lovegood." he said, fascinated.

"Yeah, she likes Marlie. Likes Lu and Rianne too. She's good like that. She's the best present I've ever had. Thank you, sir!" Deanna turned to Snape, eyes shining.

Snape shrugged. "It was nothing. Your mother suggested getting something different, so a peregrine falcon it was. Your ancestors used to breed them, did you know? It's on their ancestral coat of arms."

Rianne gasped and turned to Deanna. "You're descended from the Tal-y-Rhys family? No way!"

Deanna squirmed. "Not something I really think about much." she murmured, embarrassed.

"You should." Snape said absently. "They're an ancient and noble family whose history stretches right back to the first humans to live in these islands. Older than the Malfoys, much older. Salazar Slytherin's mother was one, as was his first wife. And one of their specialities was being able to talk to birds. In particular, peregrine falcons. Watch." He held out his arm and called something in a language none of them knew. Immediately, Nestra turned and came in to land on his wrist, nuzzling his ear gently.

Rianne's jaw dropped even further. "You're a Birdmaster!"

"It's not something I make much of. A little known talent of mine. There's Tal-y-Rhys blood on my mother's side. But it's a nice thing to have. Of course, it does help that I trained her myself."

Deanna looked dumbfounded. "But that means... she's yours, surely! I can't take something that's yours. You have her back."

Snape shook his head and allowed Nesta to fly back to Deanna. "She's not mine. She never really has been. Prefers witches. Keep her. I already have a familiar. Good day." He turned and left. Marlie came in to land.

"What was that all about?" she asked.

"Snape was demonstrating how he can talk to birds, and how both he and Deanna have Tal-y-Rhys ancestry." Rianne told her.

"Tal-y-Rhys?" Marlie seemed unimpressed. "Hardly something to boast about, half of them were dark mages, and the rest were killed or changed their name. Guess that's why you're called Tyler now. Come on, let's go in, I'm freezing."

Rianne assented and they went indoors. But Luella couldn't help noticing that Deanna looked less happy about Clytemnestra than before.

Deanna knocked gingerly on Snape's office door, and entered. Snape glanced up, and raised an eyebrow.

"Twice in one day, and not even a class together. What have I done to deserve this pleasure?" He took in Deanna's dejected features. "Miss Tyler? Is there a problem?"

Deanna, with a heavy heart, placed Nesta's cage on his desk. Nesta flapped her wings fretfully.

"I can't accept this, Professor." Deanna said quietly. "I'm sorry."

"Why not?" Snape asked, alarmed. "Don't you like her?"

"Of course I do, she's beautiful." Deanna whispered painfully, sliding into the chair opposite. "But sir, she must have cost you a fortune! Then there's all the time you put in training her. Why on earth should you give something so precious to me? I'm just a student of yours. An ordinary owl would have done!"

"No it wouldn't." Snape said harshly. "The Tal-y-Rhys heiress, own anything other than a peregrine falcon? Don't look so shocked, you are, you know. You and your mother are the last remaining members of the only family that genuinely can trace it's origins to them."

"I'm not even legitimate!" Deanna snapped.

"You don't have to be. Under Tal-y-Rhys law, inheritance passes from mother to daughter. Paternity doesn't enter into it. Caitlin Tyler's the direct firstborn female descendant of the White Lady Rhiannon Tal-y-Rhys herself. You're a Tal-y-Rhys. And you're having a peregrine."

"But, sir, you don't understand, I can't take something that you've put so much time and money into rearing. I feel bad about it. At least let me pay you."

"NO!" Snape snarled at her. Deanna recoiled in wounded surprise. Snape immediately regretted shouting at her. "You overestimate me, child." he said, rather more gently. "I never reared her. She's a wild bird. I hand-reared her grandmother when I was a boy, and members of that family line have occasionally visited me ever since.

Clytemnestra has been content to join me when I've been out in the wilderness collecting Potions ingredients from time to time, and spend time with me, but she's never been mine. She's never obeyed any command I've ever given her, or carried my letters. That is essentially an untamed, wild falcon you have there. One who has sacrificed that freedom to serve the Tal-y-Rhys heiress. Believe me, Deanna, if I had told her to take that letter to you and be your pet, she would not have done so. She offered. And I tell you, even if you leave her here now, the moment I release her, she'll fly straight back to you. You will have a very tricky time trying to get rid of her, I can assure you."

Deanna sighed resignedly. "You're not going to take her off me, are you?"

"Hardly. Release her in the grounds. See how long it is before she comes back."

Deanna got up. "All right. You win. I'll keep her. I'll let her go tonight, and if she flies in tomorrow at breakfast, I'll consider her mine and never bother you with it again."

"That's more like it." Snape said, smiling. "Honestly, the Tal-y-Rhys heiress trying to give away the family emblem. Rhiannon Tal-y-Rhys must be turning in her grave."

Deanna picked Nestra's cage up. She gazed curiously at Snape for a few moments.

"Sir, if your mother had Tal-y-Rhys blood, then doesn't that make you one as well? If inheritance passes down the mother's line."

"Most perceptive. However, I'm not the heir. And I always preferred ravens myself."

Deanna nodded and turned to go. Until something else occurred to her.

"Sir, did you actually get any compensation off Lucius Malfoy?"

"Forty Galleons. Ten for the owl's value, ten for the inconvenience, ten for each year you'd had him."

"But you didn't actually spend any of that on a new bird, did you?" Deanna grinned.

Snape allowed himself a smile. "No. I did not."

"So what did you do with it, then?"

"Well, I considered giving it to the organisers of the Glastonbury Festival if they'd relocate it to Malfoy Manor, but I didn't want their blood on my hands. So I gave it to your mother instead. I believe it's with the rest of your inheritance at Gringotts."

Deanna tilted her head to one side. "I think I preferred the Glastonbury idea myself. A photo of the Malfoys' faces would be worth more than any amount of gold."

"Very possibly, however the thought of their reaction once they'd got over the initial shock is rather less appealing. Go on, get back to your common room. And get that falcon back to the Owlery."

"Will do." Deanna grinned. "Oh, and sir."

"Yes?"

"Thank you."

"He said what?" Marlie squealed.

"He said he almost paid the organisers of Glastonbury forty Galleons to relocate to Malfoy Manor this year."

Luella burst out laughing. "Surely not? Cool idea though."

"I can't believe Professor Snape said that. It's most, well, unteacherly." said Rianne disapprovingly.

"I can't believe Deanna tried to take his Christmas present back." Marlie commented. "Deanna, why?"

"I don't know. I just felt... bad." Deanna shrugged. "It just didn't feel right accepting something that valuable off a teacher."

"I really don't get you sometimes." Marlie stared at Deanna in confusion. "DT, if someone gives you a gift that cool apparently out of the goodness of his heart, you bloody keep it!"

"That'd be it." Rianne nodded sagely. "She doesn't want to be indebted to Snape. Good reasoning."

"Well, it's OK now. Snape told me that she came to me of her own free will and stays with me of her own accord. So anyway, I let her go in the courtyard just now and told her that if she didn't want to be my pet, she could leave now, just go back to the wild. She took off, did a few circuits of the school then flew back to me. Wouldn't go until I told her all right, you can stay. Then flew off to the Owlery. Guess you could say she's really mine now. If you love something set it free and all that."

"I still wonder why he gave her to you." Rianne mused. "Why a falcon?"

Deanna shrugged. "Does it matter? It's my family's ancestral symbol, and apparently she came to Snape and told him she was meant for me. He was just passing her on. And as Marlie so rightly said, when someone gives you a present like that, you don't ask questions."

"Didn't occur to you that Snape might want something?" Luella asked.

"Like what?" Deanna asked carelessly. "Why would he want me in his debt? I've got nothing that he could possibly want. Stop being paranoid, you two. Nesta's lovely and I'm keeping her. End of story."

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Chapter Ten The Prank of the Century

The Hogwarts staff room was full of rather more whispers than usual, Snape thought as he entered it. Pouring himself a cup of herbal tea, he caught a hushed conversation between Professors McGonagall and Sprout.

"Such a shame about Mildred, isn't it?" Professor Sprout was saying.

"Indeed." Professor McGonagall said, concern colouring her voice. "Poppy says she won't be able to fly again for another three months. Which puts us in an awkward position with regards to the Quidditch Tournament."

Snape's ears pricked up at this. Mildred Hooch, unable to fly and thus unable to referee Quidditch matches?

"What about the Quidditch Tournament?" he asked innocently, trying to ignore the looks of suspicion Sprout and McGonagall were giving him.

"Mildred's injured herself tripping over her cat." Sprout told him. "She won't be able to fly until April, which means we now have no one to referee the next Quidditch matches. I mean, Minerva's volunteered for Slytherin vs. Ravenclaw, but we have no one for Gryffindor vs. Hufflepuff."

"Too bad." Snape murmured softly. Something occurred to him. "Gryffindor, did you say?"

"That's right." McGonagall said stiffly.

"They'll be playing Potter as usual, I take it?"

"Severus, we don't have a reserve Seeker, as you well know. Of course he's playing. Your point being?"

"I'll do it." Snape said suddenly.

Sprout and McGonagall looked at each other in confusion. They turned back to Snape.

"Do what?" Sprout asked, bewildered.

"Referee the match. What?" he snarled at them. Sprout was trying not to laugh, while McGonagall was gazing at him sceptically.

"Since when have you ever been in to Quidditch?" Sprout asked in derision. "Do you even know the rules?"

"They're not that difficult!" he snapped. "I'm sure I could learn."

"Severus, I've seen you on a broom." McGonagall said firmly. "Poetry in motion it isn't. Why on earth you'd want to be involved, I have no idea, you only attend matches because you want Slytherin to win..." Her voice trailed off. Snape shifted uncomfortably as the look in her eyes changed to one of fury. "That's it, isn't it? You're afraid Slytherin might, horror of horrors, actually lose the Cup this year! Of all the sneaky, deceptive..."

"Not true, Minerva!" he snapped. "I've got my reasons. Anyway, you're refereeing the Slytherin match. Who's to say you won't take the opportunity to give Gryffindor a little help?"

He knew instantly he'd gone too far. McGonagall drew herself up to her full height and caught her breath, going very pale indeed. Snape suddenly found himself mentally regressing to the student in trouble he'd once been.

"How dare you!" she hissed at him. "Accuse me of cheating! I would never unfairly favour Gryffindor in any way. I'm refereeing that match because I'm one of the few other staff members with enough knowledge of Quidditch to do it. You don't have that justification." She gave him a piercing stare.

"Well, you'll have to believe I've got good reasons then, won't you?" Snape said harshly. "Because I'm going to Dumbledore now, to ask him. I will referee that match!" And with that, he swept out of the room.

Dumbledore seemed only a little surprised by Snape's request.

"I never thought you were a Quidditch fan, Severus." he said mildly.

"Well, I'm not." he said roughly. "But I want to do it."

"Might I ask why?"

Snape gazed intently at him. "You remember the last Gryffindor match?"

"I do."

"Potter could have been killed. I don't want that happening again."

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow. "Very humanitarian of you, Severus. You surprise me, I wasn't aware you even liked the boy."

"My own feelings have nothing to do with it. But I don't want him dead." Snape shivered with emotion. "I don't want him dead." he whispered.

"Are you alright, Severus?" Dumbledore asked, a little alarmed.

Snape nodded. "I'm fine." He recovered his composure. "So. This match. Can I?"

Dumbledore regarded him keenly. "You really want to do it, don't you?"

"Yes. I do." He met Dumbledore's gaze. "I've no great liking for Potter, but I owe it to his mother to keep her son alive. Lily would never forgive me if I allowed any harm to come to him."

"Lily's dead, Severus."

"I know." Snape said bitterly. "I know."

"You're doing what?!" Caitlin howled with laughter.

"Refereeing Gryffindor's next Quidditch match. Stop laughing, it's not funny!"

Caitlin wiped her eyes and attempted to compose herself. "Sorry. It's just that the thought of you on a broom..." She somehow managed to prevent herself laughing again, but only just.

Snape glared at her. "Stop it. Everyone reacts like that. What exactly is so amusing about the thought of me refereeing a match?"

"Just that you were never really into it at school or since." Caitlin said meekly. "And Flying never was your strong point, admit it. Um. Sevi, are you sure you know what you're doing?"

"Caitlin, last time Gryffindor played a match, Potter nearly died. I can't risk that happening again."

"I know, but isn't there another way of protecting him that doesn't involve making a fool of yourself on a broom?"

Snape gritted his teeth. "I am not going to make a fool of myself! Just because I've never played the game before, have yet to master the intricacies of the rules and haven't used a broom for anything other than flights into Hogsmeade and back for ten years doesn't mean I'm going to make a fool of myself in front of the whole school." He met Caitlin's eyes. He was strongly reminded of the way Sprout and McGonagall had looked at him earlier. And now he realised why they'd been looking at him like that. "Caitlin. Oh Caitlin. What have I done?" he asked, a growing feeling of horror dawning on him.

Caitlin grinned merrily. "Your own fault, Severus. You will volunteer for these things. When's the match?"

"End of March. Six weeks away. Oh gods." Snape held his head in his hands. He looked wildly at Caitlin. "Help me."

"I can't referee the match for you, Severus." she chided gently.

"Please?" he asked hopefully. "You were really good at Quidditch at school. You're a brilliant flier. Go on, you'd be good."

"Severus, this is your problem." Caitlin said sternly. "You volunteered for this, and you're going to do it."

"How??"

"You've got six weeks to find out. I'll lend you my copy of *Quidditch Through the Ages* if you like."

"It'll take more than that to turn me into a Quidditch referee." Snape moaned.

"Well, obviously. But I'm sure we can give it our best shot."

"We?"

"Of course." Caitlin smiled. "You don't really think I'm going to let one of my best friends humiliate himself in front of the entire school? By the time I'm finished with you, Madam Hooch will be in fear of her job."

Snape clutched Caitlin's hand in a pathetic display of gratitude. "Thank you. Thank you so much. Caitlin, I swear to every god there is, I will be in your eternal debt if you can just turn me into a Quidditch expert and halfway decent flier in six weeks. I will never, ever, have the temerity to ask you for anything again. Ever."

"Until you need your next favour doing." Caitlin said sarcastically. "Alright. Where's a good place to practice? Where we won't be seen."

"There's a valley the other side of Hogwarts. You'll be able to Apparate in, and there's very little chance of any students seeing us."

"Well, I can put up some Unremarkable Charms and a glamour or two just in case. Then there's your theory training. Your place or mine?"

"Yours is probably more secure, but on the other hand, mine is more conducive to study. Let's alternate."

"Done. When shall we start?"

"Tonight?"

Marlie returned from Quidditch practice in a better mood than she'd been in for ages. Deanna and Rianne gave each other knowing looks and settled themselves expectantly. Luella also noted Marlie's grin, which contained more than a hint of sadism, and the way in which she was bouncing around, desperate to share the news with them.

"Alright, Marlie. Out with it. What's happened to light your fuse then?" Luella sighed. "You're clearly dying to tell us."

"Nothing much." Marlie grinned smugly. "Just that the Quidditch Cup's ours again this year."

All three sat up at this.

"Yeah?" Deanna asked, intrigued. "What's happened? Has Harry resigned from the Gryffindor team?"

"No, not as far as I know." Marlie grinned. "Although he might do when he hears this. You know Madam Hooch won't be refereeing the next round of matches due to injury?"

"Yes." they answered guardedly. Marlie's grin grew even bigger.

"Well, Flint just told us who's standing in."

"And that would be...?" Rianne asked, getting tired of waiting.

"All in good time. Our match against Ravenclaw is to be refereed by McGonagall."

"McGonagall?" snapped Deanna. "She's head of Gryffindor, that's hardly fair!"

"Oh be sensible, Tyler. She's one of the few teachers who knows anything about Quidditch. And since when has McGonagall been anything but scrupulously fair?" Rianne said irritably. "Who's doing the other match?"

"That, my dear Rianne, is the good news. None other than our very own Professor Snape." Marlie smiled gleefully.

"Snape?!" they all cried as one.

"Since when has Snape refereed a Quidditch match?" demanded Deanna. "He doesn't even like the game, does he?"

Rianne shook her head. "Not interested, never has been. Any idea why, Marls?"

Marlie shrugged. "No one knows. It's a puzzle. Maybe he was annoyed that McGonagall is refereeing our match. But who cares? Gryffindor'll never win with him refereeing. The Cup's ours! Isn't that great?"

"Brilliant!" Deanna grinned. "We're going to be Champions again!" Marlie and Deanna shared a spontaneous hug. Rianne sighed.

"Well, I hope he knows what he's doing. We don't want him injuring himself as well."

"Ah, Rianne, he'll be fine. I'm sure he wouldn't have volunteered if he didn't think he could do it." Deanna said dismissively. "Quit worrying."

Luella however shared Rianne's fears. Snape had previously had no interest whatsoever in Quidditch. So why was he now volunteering to referee a game? It didn't make sense. Unless of course, you knew about the Philosopher's Stone. Was that involved somehow? She just hoped he knew what he was doing.

"Anyway." Marlie got up. "I have to go to the library. Need to do my Transfiguration homework. See you guys."

Marlie had not gone far when she heard footsteps behind her. She spun round, one hand curling around her wand.

"Don't fret, Lovegood." Draco sneered. "I'm not stalking you. I'm on the same errand as you are."

"You're actually going to the library?" Marlie asked in disbelief. "That I doubt. You spend less time on your homework than I do, and that's saying something."

Draco shrugged. "Defence Against the Dark Arts homework due in. Not that it's exactly interesting. Now if I'd gone to a proper school like Durmstrang, we'd be doing the real thing. Interesting things."

"Nothing stopping you transferring." Marlie said sourly as her cousin caught up with her and began walking alongside.

"My mother wanted me at a school closer to home, so Hogwarts it was. Why, thinking of getting me expelled too?"

Marlie spun to face him, fury blazing in her eyes. She bit her tongue and calmed herself down. After all, he really wasn't worth getting into a fight over.

"Don't slip poison to me or any of my friends, and you won't have to worry, will you?" she said brusquely.

"What makes you think it'd be poison this time?" Draco said softly. "Never send a Crabbe to do a Malfoy's job."

Marlie really would have hit him this time, but she was distracted by voices coming from around the corner, one of which they recognised as Professor Snape's.

"Did I mention how grateful I am for this, Caitlin?"

"Many, many times, but I'm not averse to hearing it again." a woman responded, amused. Draco gave Marlie a quizzical look. Marlie, however, recognised the woman instantly and began to grin.

Professor Snape and Mrs. Tyler stepped around the corner and halted immediately on seeing the two children. Mrs. Tyler gave Marlie a warm smile of recognition. Snape, however, was somewhere between fury and horror.

"What are you two doing out of your common room?" he snarled.

"Going to the library, sir." Draco said innocently. "Why, what else would we be doing?"

Snape glared at him as if to say he could guess only too clearly what else they might be doing.

Marlie swiftly changed the subject. "Hello, Mrs. Tyler." she said cheerfully. "What are you doing here? Nothing wrong with Deanna, I hope."

"No, Deanna's fine." Mrs. Tyler smiled. "Actually, it's really a social call. Severus is merely calling on my Quidditch expertise, seeing as he'll be refereeing Gryffindor's next match."

Draco was now looking at Marlie even more curiously and beginning to grin. Marlie avoided his eyes, not wanting to burst out laughing.

"OK, then." Marlie said calmly. "We'll leave you to it. Come on, Malfoy." She dragged Draco away and out of sight.

They both waited until there was little chance of Snape overhearing them before they finally met each other's eyes. Both dissolved into helpless laughter.

"Calling on her Quidditch expertise, eh?" Draco sniggered. "Is that the oldest chat-up line in the book or what?"

"Stop it." Marlie said, giggling. "I'm sure he's not really having an affair with her. Deanna'd hit the roof."

Draco laughed even harder at this. "Tyler's mother! And Snape! Aphrodite, yes! Could it get any better? I must say, Lovegood," he added, recovering himself, "you never told me Tyler's mum was such a babe. I can quite see why Snape's taken a shine to her. Quite fancy her myself."

"She wouldn't be interested in you, Malfoy." Marlie said lazily. "Quite apart from the fact you're only eleven, she seems to prefer Snape anyway. Oh, sorry, Severus." She went off into another fit of laughter.

"Very informal." Draco grinned. "Oh, just wait until Tyler hears this." He turned to go back to the common room.

"Wait!" Marlie grabbed his arm. "You can't run in there and tell her, just like that."

"Why not?" demanded Draco.

"Because, my dear cousin," Marlie grinned, "these things require *planning*."

Deanna glanced up irritably as a grinning Draco strode over to her, an apparently furious Marlie behind him.

"One word, Malfoy, one word!" she shouted. Draco ignored her and sat down next to Deanna.

"What do you want, Malfoy?" Deanna said wearily. "I'm not in the mood for one of your games."

"No game of mine." Draco grinned. "Only one playing games is your mother, who I've just had the pleasure of meeting. You didn't tell me she was such a stunner."

Deanna glared at him. "If you've just come to make insulting remarks about my mother, Malfoy... Anyway, where did you meet her?"

"Why, right here, of course!" Draco said, wide-eyed. "Just on her way back from a date with our dear House Master."

"Shut up, Malfoy!" Marlie yelled. Draco took no notice, just grinning even wider.

Deanna went pale. "She is not seeing Professor Snape!" she shouted at him, drawing more than a few looks from her fellow Slytherins.

"Oh, but she is..." Draco purred. "Quite cosy, they were too. He was just taking her into his office for a few tips on Quidditch refereeing. They're probably there now, discussing flying technique and giving his broomstick a good polishing."

"WHAT??" shrieked Deanna. Marlie hung her head. Deanna turned to her in outrage.

"He *is* lying, I take it. Isn't he? Marlie, please. I beg you." Deanna stared at her in desperation. Marlie could only look back at her miserably.

"I'm sorry, Deanna. I tried to stop him. But he wouldn't listen."

"AAAAGGGHHH!!!" Deanna screamed. Snatching up her wand, she raced out into the corridor, the door slamming behind her, her housemates staring after her in stunned surprise. Marlie and Draco watched her go, grins beginning to spread over their faces. As one, they slowly turned to look at each other and burst out laughing.

"Did you see the look on her face?" Draco howled.

Marlie nodded weakly, wiping tears from her eyes. "She's going to kill us. Oh, but it was so worth it! Damn, we're good."

"Absolutely." Draco sighed. "Good acting, by the way. I was worried you were going to burst out laughing at a crucial moment and ruin it, but no, you were very convincing."

"Of course." Marlie tossed her hair back in the manner beloved of beautiful women everywhere. "Am I not a Slytherin? I have to say, though, you weren't bad yourself. That broomstick remark...! Does your mother know you have such a filthy mind?"

Rianne was regarding them both in astonishment. "You two planned this entire thing?"

Draco and Marlie nodded. Rianne shook her head in disbelief.

"I do not believe you two. How could you do that to her, she'll be so humiliated!"

"That's the general idea." grinned Draco.

"Ah, come on Ri, it'll be fun!" laughed Marlie.

"Not when Tyler gets back breathing fire and cursing you and all your families. I don't suppose her mother really is up here, is she?" Rianne asked scathingly.

"Actually, yes." said Marlie. Luella pricked up her ears.

"Is she? So you mean she really is giving Professor Snape a few pointers on Quidditch then?" she asked in surprise.

Draco snickered. "That's her story, anyway. Who knows what carnal delights they are even now engaging in..."

"Malfoy!" snapped Rianne. "Shut up! I am sure Professor Snape is not having an affair with her! Back me up here, Lu."

Luella had been watching all this in quiet admiration for Marlie and Draco's daring, suffering only slight twinges of disloyalty.

"No, of course not. I'm sure she wouldn't." she said hastily. "Although..." While she had no wish to see Deanna humiliated, the entire situation couldn't help but strike her as amusing. "I do hope Deanna doesn't walk in on anything she shouldn't."

Marlie gave a sly grin. "Well, when she gets back, we'll find out."

Snape ushered Caitlin into his office, less than pleased.

"I thought you said you'd put a glamour over us both!" he hissed at her.

"Must have slipped my mind." she said innocently.

"Slipped your mind indeed... Now the entire Slytherin common room is going to be buzzing with rumours and speculation, and my job is going to be impossible! Of all the students to see us, it had to be Malfoy and Miss Lovegood. And you had to tell them, didn't you? Couldn't bluff your way out of it, could you?"

Caitlin was unmoved. "Severus, no matter what I said, they were going to talk. Would you have had me lie to them?"

"I'm amazed you even had to ask that. You, who once suggested putting a Memory Charm on Mr. Malfoy."

"I bet you're regretting not letting me do it now, aren't you?" Caitlin grinned. "Ah, you'll survive. Just tough it out and come down hard on any student who says anything. Now." She produced a copy of *Quidditch Through the Ages* which she'd picked up from the library. "I don't know how much you know, so I'll just give a basic overview of the rules before starting with Chasers. Pull up a seat, my friend. We could be here a while."

However, they had not been at work long before they were interrupted. The door burst open, and Deanna stormed in.

"GET YOUR FILTHY HANDS OFF..." She stopped and took in the scene in front of her. Caitlin was sitting back in one of the chairs with her feet on the desk, *Quidditch Through the Ages* on her lap. Snape was sat at his desk, quill in hand, in the middle of taking notes. Both were looking at her in surprise.

It dawned on Deanna that she'd been had. "Oh my." she said quietly. "You two really *are* learning the rules of Quidditch."

"Well, of course we are, dear." Caitlin said, with a slightly puzzled air. "What did you think we were doing?" A slow smile began to creep across her face as Deanna's expression said all too clearly what she thought they'd been doing. Snape had the grace to avert his eyes, although that could have been more to avoid laughing than anything else.

Deanna swiftly mustered what remaining shreds of dignity she had left. "Well, er, in that case, I'll, um, leave you to it. I'm just off to murder Malfoy, see you both soon." With that, she was gone.

Caitlin and Snape watched her go in silence. Finally, he raised his eyes to look at her. The moment he did so, they both dissolved into laughter.

"Oh my! You two really are learning the rules of Quidditch!" Caitlin laughed, doing an all too accurate impression of her daughter.

Snape dried his eyes. "Whose idea do you think that was, Mr. Malfoy's or Miss Lovegood's?"

"Wouldn't like to say, Sevi. I think it was one of those things that simultaneously occurred to both, and had such potential that they had no option other than to suspend their differences and run with it."

"Those are always the best, aren't they?" Snape grinned. He gazed into the distance. "I wonder if I should go into the Nest, make sure everything's alright. Stop the bloodshed getting out of hand."

"Better not." Caitlin cautioned. "The mood most of them will be in right now, it could prove embarrassing. Anyway, I think Deanna's suffered enough. Probably best if you respect her dignity and act like it never happened. Draco and Marlie are quite capable of looking after themselves."

"I suppose so. Anyway, it will give our devious offspring the opportunity to devise revenge on them both. It'll be interesting to see what she comes up with. Now, you were saying about tackles from behind?"

Deanna burst in to the Slytherin common room in fury, wand raised. By this time, Marlie and Draco had filled everyone else in on what had happened, and the whole of Slytherin House was watching expectantly.

"You're dead meat, Malfoy!" she screamed at him, red with rage. Draco seemed unbothered. Marlie tried unsuccessfully not to laugh.

"Do you know what they were doing in there?" she snarled at him. "Do you?"

"Position 47 of the Kama Sutra?" Draco inquired. Next to him, Marlie began sniggering helplessly.

"She was describing the ways in which it's possible for Chasers to commit fouls on each other!" Deanna yelled. All over the room, Slytherins were turning away and snickering. "They really were learning about Quidditch! I've made a complete fool of myself." She noticed Marlie sniggering. "Were you in on this?!"

"Um." Marlie said, unsure what to say. "Sorry. Er... maybe we misinterpreted the situation?"

"Misinterpreted, my arse. I can't believe you two did this to me. Well, OK, I can believe Malfoy would. But you... You're meant to be my friend!"

"Sorry, Deanna." Marlie mumbled. "But you've got to admit, it was pretty funny."

"It was not funny! It was embarrassing. I've got to have a Potions class with him tomorrow, how on earth am I meant to look him in the eye? Not to mention having to

face Mum when school finishes." She sank into a chair and glared fiercely at Luella who was trying to conceal her giggles. "And you can stop laughing and all."

"Sorry." Luella said weakly. "At least there won't be any rumours now about Snape and your mum."

"No, they'll all be far too busy talking about me!" Deanna snapped. "Thanks a bundle, Marlie. And you, Malfoy!" she called at Draco, who had rejoined Crabbe and Goyle.

"Any time, Tyler." he drawled languidly.

"I'm so sorry about them, Deanna." Rianne said, giving Draco and Marlie stern looks of disapproval. "I did try and tell them off, but they absolutely refused to take me seriously."

"No surprises there." Deanna said acidly. "I cannot believe you sometimes, Marlie. Teaming up with Malfoy, of all people! How could you?"

"Sorry, DT. But he was there at the time and it just seemed too good an opportunity to miss. I know he's Draco Malfoy and all, but he was the perfect accomplice. I promise not to team up with him on a regular basis, if it helps."

"Good thing too, if this is the outcome." Luella remarked. "You two working together? Doesn't bear thinking about. It'd be like having the Weasley twins in our house."

"Hey, now that's not a bad idea!" Marlie grinned.

"Lu, don't encourage her, for Hera's sake!" Rianne said, appalled.

"Yes, the thought of Slytherin's two most twisted minds working together is not something I really want to imagine." Deanna said, still somewhat bitter. She got out her homework. "Right. I am going to do my Potions homework. And we are not going to discuss this ever again. End of story. OK, what are the principal ingredients of a Forgetfulness potion?"

As Luella and Rianne starting fighting over the chance to show off their knowledge, Marlie glanced over at her cousin. He noticed her looking at him and winked mischievously. Marlie grinned back. And from that moment on, while Draco and Marlie did not exactly become best friends, they each harboured a certain respect for the other. To quote another top writer, there's certain things that you can't do together without starting to like the other person. And executing the Prank of the Century is one of them.

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Chapter Eleven A Reprieve For Slytherin

Six weeks ticked by. The Slytherin vs. Ravenclaw match came and went. Marlie, determined to prove she was still as good a Seeker as she'd always been, deliberately held off going for the Snitch, letting her team mates rack up the points for Slytherin first. After the match had gone on for nearly two hours, with Slytherin leading Ravenclaw 150 - 80, she finally put them out of their misery with a stunning capture at the Slytherin end, dodging past Laetitia, Jordan, two Ravenclaw Chasers and Professor McGonagall to pluck the Snitch effortlessly out of the sky.

At the post-match party, Deanna and Luella were congratulating her.

"Well done, Marlie!" Deanna patted her on the back proudly. "See? Told you you could do it."

"Yeah, we'll be back to our winning ways in no time!" Luella added. "The Cup is ours!"

Marlie was not convinced. "Yeah? Gryffindor are the main rivals and we didn't beat them. All they've got to do is beat Hufflepuff, which let's face it, isn't hard, and they're in front. We could still lose!" Marlie looked thoroughly depressed.

"Not with Snape refereeing their next match." Rianne pointed out. "They'll have to do pretty well there to get a victory. Come on, Lovegood. You played the best Quidditch of your life, we won by miles and you're still depressed? What will make you happy?"

"Not being kicked off the team next season." Marlie said miserably. "If we lose the Cup...!"

"Stop being so defeatist." said Deanna firmly. "We're not going to lose the Cup. We can't lose the Cup. We're Slytherin House, the mighty Verts-et-Argents. We won't lose. We can't."

Finally, the crucial day arrived. Gryffindor vs. Hufflepuff. The four girls found themselves seats near the back, which Deanna claimed actually offered the best views. Luella thought she had a point, but was it strictly necessary to be so high up? She kept her eyes focused on the sky.

Marlie was gazing fixedly at the teams as they filed in. Rianne, sitting next to her, commented "Must be a change watching the action from here instead of up there, mustn't it?"

"I would so rather be flying." Marlie whispered. "My whole Quidditch future's riding on this and there's nothing I can do! I feel so helpless."

"Well, don't go helping the other side and you won't have to worry, will you?" said a voice from the row in front. All four of them turned to look. It was Draco, flanked by Crabbe and Goyle.

"Shut up, Malfoy." Deanna said irritably, returning her gaze to the players who were now filing onto the pitch.

Draco shrugged. "Just offering some friendly advice." He turned back to watching the match get underway. "I wonder how long Potter's going to stay on his broom this time? Anyone want to bet? What about you, Weasley?" This was directed at Ron in the row in front. Ron didn't answer. Like the rest of the crowd, he was watching Hufflepuff take a penalty which Snape had given them after George Weasley had hit a Bludger at him.

"It's starting." Deanna grinned. "Anyone want to bet on how many penalties he's going to award Hufflepuff by the time he's through?"

Luella slapped her forehead. "Ah, no, what a business opportunity missed! We could have made a fortune on that. Maybe next time. You up for it, Marls?"

Marlie didn't reply. Her attention was focused on a penalty Snape had awarded Hufflepuff for no reason she could identify. Hufflepuff put it away in no time, and Marlie sagged in relief.

Luella's attention was caught by Draco sneering "Longbottom, if brains were gold, you'd be poorer than Weasley, and that's saying something."

Then Ron's voice replying menacingly "I'm warning you, Malfoy, one more word..."

And a sudden shriek from Hermione. "Harry!"

Marlie howled and buried her face in her hands. Harry had gone into a dive, and Marlie's Seeker instincts had told her immediately what that meant. He'd seen the Snitch.

"No, lose sight of it!" Marlie moaned.

"What's he doing, is he trying to knock Snape out or what?" Rianne demanded. "He'll lose points for sure if he does that."

"You're in luck Weasley, Potter's obviously spotted some money on the ground." Draco remarked. Ron lost it and pounced on Draco, wrestling him to the ground. Next to him, Neville Longbottom hesitated, before leaping in to give him a hand.

Luella and Deanna turned away from the game to watch the fight instead.

"Exactly what does Longbottom think he's doing?" Deanna asked casually.

Luella watched the blur that was Neville, Crabbe and Goyle.

"Trying to get himself killed, I imagine."

"Well, I'll say this for him, he's brave. Stupid, but brave. Still, at least it proves he's a real Gryffindor. I did have my doubts."

"Do you reckon we should help him out?" Luella asked, concerned. "I mean, he could get hurt."

Deanna drew her wand out. "Go on then. You ready?" Luella drew her own wand with a nod and the two of them leapt over the seats.

Marlie howled in pain and desperation. Next to her Rianne buried her head on Marlie's shoulder.

"Nooo!" moaned Marlie. "He can't have caught it already!" But he had. Harry was even now coming in to land, arm raised in triumph.

Rianne looked up at her friend. "How?" she whispered. "The game's only five minutes old if that! Not even you've caught the Snitch in five minutes before!"

Marlie shook her head numbly. "Current Hogwarts record, twenty minutes, set by me in our first year against Gryffindor, funnily enough. Ha. Gods, Rianne, they won. They won. We've had it, Ri."

Rianne held her. "Hey. Cheer up. We can still do it if Ravenclaw beat them. And assuming we beat the Huffs, which we will! Not all over yet."

"It might as well be!" Marlie wept. "Ravenclaw are good, but Gryffindor are better! We've lost, Ri, they're going to kick me off the team next season, my Quidditch career is over, and it's all my fault!"

"What's all your fault?" Deanna gasped as she clambered back into her seat, clutching her stomach. Luella followed, rubbing her jaw.

Rianne and Marlie looked at them in amazement. Deanna had what looked like the beginnings of a black eye while Luella had a rather nasty cut on her left cheek and some tears in her robes.

"What happened to you two?" Rianne asked.

"Got in a fight." Deanna explained. "Crabbe and Goyle were picking on Neville Longbottom so we thought we'd break it up. Longbottom's still out cold, we're going to take him up to the hospital wing now. Crabbe and Goyle are already on their way there."

"Crabbe's sporting a plague of moles on his back." Luella grinned. "Real ones. While Goyle... what did you do to Goyle, Dee?"

"Turned him into a gorilla. Well, his head anyway. Not that you can really tell the difference, but still."

Rianne looked impressed. "Ooh, well done. Honestly, those two. Always picking on someone. Poor old Neville, is he alright?"

Marlie, for once, did not look happy with them. "Never mind him, what about you? You'll get in trouble, you'll lose us points, we can't afford to lose the House Cup too!"

"Oh, Marlie, relax. There's more important things in life. What would Morticia think of you?" said Deanna gently. "Come on you lot, let's get Neville to the hospital wing."

Life in the Slytherin common room proceeded more or less as normal after that, although far more subdued. Snape was in a fouler mood than usual, and even Deanna and Luella were keeping quiet around him. The Quidditch team were hardly speaking to Marlie, and Marcus Flint was a man to be avoided. Besides which, the work was now being piled on, exams were only a couple of months away, and the time for partying had ended. Only Draco seemed unaffected, remaining his usual wisecracking self.

"Look at him!" Deanna hissed. "Does he ever do any work?"

Rianne raised her eyebrows in stunned amazement. "Coming from you, I'd say that's almost hypocritical."

"He's a firstie, Dee." said Luella. "Wait until he's our age, then he'll change. You weren't really very assiduous with the old homework when you were a first year, were you?"

"What do you mean, when she was a first year?" snapped Marlie. "She still isn't! Quirrell and Flitwick are the only ones who ever get any effort out of her. Gods know how."

"Just because I'm focusing on the subjects most likely to benefit me when I'm an Auror." said Deanna lazily. "What are you up to, Marls?"

Marlie had her head buried in a weighty tome on Transfiguration. "Doing some Transfiguration research."

Luella glanced at the book's title. "*Advanced Transfiguration* by Annie Major. Marlie, you can't possibly need to know all that!" Marlie shuffled uncomfortably. "You never know." she said mysteriously. "I might."

"All very well and good, but I think Professor McGonagall might be rather more pleased if you did the work she's actually set you." Rianne said disapprovingly.

"Done that."

"OK, what about your other subjects? Astronomy, Herbology, Potions, Defence Against the Dark Arts, Charms, History of Magic, Care of Magical Creatures, Divination, surely you've work to do in all of them?"

Marlie put down the book with a sigh. "Alright, alright, point taken." She started working on her History of Magic essay. However, she continued to glance at Draco. He was looking disturbingly pleased with himself. What was he up to now?

The following day, Marlie cornered him. "Alright, Malfoy, out with it. You've been wandering around grinning like your worst enemy's just lost a winning lottery ticket. What are you planning now?"

"Nothing!" Draco said innocently. Marlie was not fooled.

"Don't even bother lying to me, Malfoy. I'm mates with the Weasley twins, I can spot lies a mile off. What are you really up to?"

Draco looked around to check that no one was looking. Pulling Marlie aside, he lowered his voice.

"Alright, I'll let you in on it, but don't tell anyone! I've discovered a way to get Potter in a whole heap of trouble and maybe just win the Cup for Slytherin."

Marlie was intrigued. Something that could salvage the Cup for Slytherin? Now this was interesting.

"Tell me more." she purred.

"Dragons." he grinned.

"Dragons?! Malfoy, that's illegal, very illegal! I hope you've not brought one to school. They're dangerous!" said Marlie sternly.

"Not me." Draco grinned even wider. "Hagrid."

"Hagrid!"

"Keep your voice down! Yes, Hagrid. He's got this Norwegian Ridgeback kept in his hut. Hatched last week."

"A Norwegian Ridgeback - Malfoy, those things are vicious. Do you have any idea how big they grow up to be? The Rutland Ridgebacks have a life-size one outside their ground, it's huge! Bigger than my house! There's no way Hagrid can have one of those, it'll wreck his house, and I don't just mean knock a few pieces of furniture over!"

Draco grinned. "I know. That's why he's getting rid of it on Saturday. Some friends of Weasley's brother are coming to pick it up at midnight on the Astronomy tower. And guess who's going to be out of bed after curfew to meet them?"

"Who's that?" Marlie asked curiously.

"Potter and Granger. Weasley was going too, but he's in the hospital wing with a dragon bite. Isn't this wonderful?" Draco was practically dancing with delight.

Marlie bit her lip. This didn't sound good. On the one hand, she wasn't at all averse to seeing Gryffindor lose points. But on the other, she did like young Harry, and certainly didn't want to see him expelled.

"So what do you plan to do about it?" Marlie asked. "Go to Snape or something? Hera knows he'd like to see Potter out."

"Oh no." Draco grinned. "This works much better as blackmail material. I'm going to meet up with them, confront them and threaten to tell Snape if Potter doesn't agree to throw the Ravenclaw match."

"Malfoy!" Marlie gasped in shock. "That's terrible! That's unethical! That's... that's... Do you reckon it'll work?"

"I think so." said Draco confidently. "Look at it this way, if he doesn't agree, I go to Snape and Gryffindor lose lots of points and quite possibly their star Seeker. If he does, Gryffindor still won't win the Championship. It's a win-win situation."

"Malfoy, that's amazing." said Marlie in awe. "Morally bankrupt, of course, but amazing nonetheless. Well, good luck. I'll keep it quiet. But if it goes wrong, of course, then I know nothing about any of it."

"I would expect nothing less. Well, goodbye Lovegood. Maybe your place on the team is safe after all." Draco grinned evilly and slipped off, leaving Marlie alone. Hoisting her bag up, she turned to go to her next lesson.

Luella stepped quietly out of the shadows and watched Marlie go. While still unsure how she managed to do it, being able to hide herself like this did have its advantages. Well, well, so that was why Malfoy had been so cheerful lately. It was a brilliant plan, Luella had to admit. However, there was also no getting away from the fact that blackmail was illegal. Not to mention cheating. No way, she thought. No way is he getting away with it. Harry and Hermione are my friends, I'm not letting them get in trouble. She checked her timetable. Transfiguration next. The ghost of a plan beginning to form, Luella hurried off.

The lesson could not pass quickly enough. As the rest of the class filed out, Luella told Deanna not to bother waiting, she just wanted to ask McGonagall for help with something, and went up to her desk.

Professor McGonagall looked up. "Yes, Miss Martin?"

"Um, Professor, I'm not sure if I ought to tell you this, but..."

Professor McGonagall looked concerned. "Tell me what?" Her eyes narrowed in suspicion. "What have Miss Tyler and Miss Lovegood been up to now?"

"Nothing. It's not them, it's Malfoy."

"Malfoy? What is he up to? And shouldn't you be going to Professor Snape with this, you are both in his house after all." McGonagall looked at her curiously.

Luella wrung her hands. "I know but if I go to Snape, Malfoy might suspect it was me who told on him."

McGonagall sighed wearily. The machinations of a Slytherin's mind were clearly something she was used to by now. "Alright. What is he planning?"

"He's planning to sneak out of bounds Saturday night. I think he's heading for the Astronomy Tower, about half eleven or so. I heard him talking to his friends about it, some kind of dare apparently. I just thought you should know."

"Is he now." McGonagall said firmly, her mouth stiffening into a thin line. "Well, thank you for letting me know, Miss Martin. I shall see if I can intercept him. You did the right thing in telling me."

"Thank you, Professor." Luella murmured softly. As she turned to go, a sly smile crept over her face. Phase One had worked perfectly.

Phase Two, however, was rather more dangerous. Saturday night came around to find Luella wrapped in her black school cloak and wearing her slippers, standing by the common room door waiting for Draco.

Sure enough, at half past eleven, he tiptoed quietly into the room. And sure enough, he paid no attention to Luella whatsoever, but just walked past her. Luella followed him out, picturing a white mist around her, shielding her from view. He was making for the Astronomy Tower, that was certain, Luella thought to herself. Let's hope I can pull this off.

Her plan was this. Follow Malfoy and watch as he walked straight into McGonagall and a certain detention. Then wait at the Astronomy Tower for Harry and Hermione and warn them that McGonagall was around. They'd get rid of the dragon together, then she'd extend the invisibility shield around them and get them back to the Gryffindor common room before sneaking home.

Risky. Very risky. Not for her, she was pretty certain the shield would hold. But she hoped and prayed that Harry and Hermione didn't walk into McGonagall or anyone else while they still had the dragon. Because if they did, they'd get more than a detention.

Draco finally came to a halt at the foot of the Astronomy Tower. Huddled in the darkness he waited, a grin on his face. Luella held her breath. Sure enough, moments later, he gave a yell and started struggling frantically. Wandlight flared and there was Professor McGonagall clutching his arm furiously.

"Detention!" she shouted. "And twenty points from Slytherin! Wandering around in the middle of the night, how *dare* you!"

"You don't understand, Professor," Draco bleated, "Harry Potter's coming - he's got a dragon!"

"What utter rubbish! How dare you tell such lies! Come on - I shall see Professor Snape about you, Malfoy!" With that, she dragged the protesting boy off. Luella grinned. OK, so they'd lost twenty points, but it could have been worse. And McGonagall didn't seem to be aware of Harry or Hermione being out, which was good news. All that remained now was to wait for them to turn up, follow them up to the top of the tower, explain what was going on and escort them back after they'd got rid of the dragon. Easy. She sat down and waited. And waited. Ten minutes slipped by, then twenty. Still no sign of them. Luella checked her watch. It was now half past midnight, and she'd been here since quarter to. Where were they? Was this some elaborate prank on Malfoy? Had they made up the whole story about the dragon just to lure him out of bed and get him in trouble? Very possibly. Feeling highly annoyed, Luella got up to leave.

A noise from behind her made her turn around. Her heart leapt into her mouth. *Filch*. Fortunately, he hadn't noticed her. Instead, he was hiding in the shadows, watching the entrance to the tower carefully. Luella felt her heart sink as she suddenly heard footsteps descending the tower staircase. Wait a second. Someone on their way *out* of the tower? But she'd been here since before midnight, how could they possibly have slipped past her? Had she fallen asleep or something?

Harry and Hermione stepped out into the corridor, grinning happily and giggling together. Luella felt sick inside. Filch noticed them instantly and stepped forward, gloating.

"Well, well, well." he whispered. "We *are* in trouble."

Luella held her head in her hands. The one thing she hadn't wanted to happen. The thought of throwing down the shield and hypnotising Filch into forgetting he'd ever seen them passed fleetingly through her mind, but she just couldn't take the risk. Using her powers to hide from teachers was one thing but actually trying to hypnotise them was something else. She could only watch helplessly as Filch dragged them both gleefully away.

Luella crept back to her common room with a heavy heart. What had gone wrong? Had Harry and Hermione suspected that Draco knew and gone up early? Or did one of them have the same powers she did? She truly didn't know. Cursing her foolishness in not waiting for them actually in the tower as soon as Draco and McGonagall had gone, she slipped back inside the deserted common room, dropped the invisibility shield and returned to her dorm.

Slipping quietly inside, she gently pushed the door shut and tiptoed across the room to her bed. She'd almost made it when a cold voice behind her said "*Pyrus Ignito!*" and the fire flared up.

Luella turned slowly. Rianne, Deanna and Marlie were sitting by the fire gazing at her. They did not look happy.

"And just where," Deanna said icily in tones that reminded Luella of Professor Snape, "do you think you've been?"

"So let's get this straight." Rianne was saying. "Malfoy thought Harry and Hermione had this illegal dragon and were taking it to the Astronomy Tower to give it to some of Charlie Weasley's friends."

"Actually, that bit's true." Marlie pointed out. "He told me himself."

"OK. So you told McGonagall that he was going out-of-bounds so he'd get caught. You then managed to sneak out after him without him or McGonagall seeing you, no mean feat in itself." Rianne said sarcastically. "After watching him get caught, you waited for Harry and Hermione to turn up so you could warn them and see them back safely after they'd got rid of the dragon. Only you missed them and they got caught by Filch, but not until after they'd met up with these dragon experts."

Luella nodded dumbly. Rianne stared at her incomprehensibly. "Luella, I have only two words for you. How, and more importantly, why?"

Luella shifted uncomfortably. "They're my friends. I didn't want them to get in trouble. Plus I don't like the idea of blackmail. Thought it was a good plan, me."

"Good plan??" Marlie snapped, shaking her platinum tresses. "We almost had the Gryffindors over a barrel! Not now we don't. They'll beat us for sure. Especially now that your meddling has lost us twenty points. Cheers, Lu."

"Oh Marlie, be quiet." Deanna snapped. "She's right, blackmail is pretty low. Anyway, Harry and Hermione got caught, so they're likely to lose loads of points too, so that'll even things up. We might even get our lead back. What I am more interested in is the how of things. How Luella managed to sneak up to the Astronomy Tower and back, with Draco 'Supergrass' Malfoy, Professor McGonagall, officially the sharpest knife in the drawer, and Filch who's had more practice than anyone in catching out-of-bounds students all within spitting distance of her, and not get caught when The Boy Who Lived, the smartest witch in the first year and Malfoy himself all did." Deanna folded her arms and gave Luella a meaningful look. "I think some kind of explanation is called for here, don't you?"

Luella stared helplessly at the three of them. They were all giving her extremely penetrating looks.

"Well?" Rianne asked softly. "We're waiting."

Luella sighed. She might as well tell them. "Alright, alright. I can make myself invisible."

"What? How?"

"That's impossible!"

"How long have you been able to do that?" Deanna demanded.

"I don't know." Luella said quietly. "I don't think it's magic, not in the normal sense. I mean, I don't need a wand or anything. I just imagine a wall of mist cloaking me and it's done, no one notices me, even if I'm right in front of them. I used it tonight, so no one saw me, and I was going to use it to get Harry and Hermione back to their common room. It can conceal other people too, if they're with me. I used it that night we investigated the forbidden corridor with Fred and George, that's why Filch couldn't see us."

Marlie looked impressed. "Wow! That's so cool. Hey, watch out Hogwarts! This school is ours."

Deanna grinned. "Oh, you said it. The Weasley twins are going to have nothing on us."

Rianne, however, was giving Marlie and Deanna bone-chillingly cold looks. "What night you investigated the forbidden corridor with Fred and George?"

Luella could only grin as Deanna and Marlie felt their moral high ground sliding away in a mudslide of Atlantean proportions. Rianne knew nothing about that particular adventure.

"Oh of course, you weren't with us, were you? Well, Fred and George invited these two out to investigate it back in December. Except I caught them sneaking out and so they had to invite me along or I'd have told on them. Filch nearly caught us, and we'd have been in a whole heap of trouble if I hadn't willed him not to see us. Which he didn't." Luella was enjoying herself enormously.

Deanna and Marlie wilted under Rianne's steady gaze. When Rianne spoke, it was in almost Snapien tones.

"So not only did you sneak out after curfew, you went to the most out-of-bounds place in the school! I don't believe you two sometimes! If you'd been caught...! It's a very good thing Luella caught you. Do you realise how many points you could have lost us?" She threw up her hands in despair, before fixing all three of them with a keen look. "Alright. In the past now. But I want a promise from you three that you will not go outside after hours again! With the current points situation, we just can't risk it! Promise me!"

"Promise, Ri." Deanna and Marlie muttered.

"Don't worry, I've got no plans to do it again." said Luella.

"Good." Rianne got up. "Now, I suggest we all go to bed. See you three in the morning. Goodnight." And with that, she turned in.

The next morning, all Luella wanted to do was get some breakfast down her. Deanna, however, had other plans.

"No, come on, you three, I want to check the points tally. See what damage last night's little escapade's done."

They duly filed after her to check. Luella was curious to see how many points Harry and Hermione had managed to lose. Never in her wildest dreams though could she have guessed at the result.

For a moment, all four of them gazed in silence at the red sand in the Gryffindor hourglass and the golden figure at the bottom.

"Lu," said Deanna at length, "is it me or is the Gryffindor glass looking distinctly emptier than usual?"

There was no doubt about it, the sand level was a lot lower than it had been yesterday. 150 points lower, to be precise.

Rianne gave a low whistle. "Now that's a lot of points lost. In fact, I do believe" here she began to grin, "that that puts them in last place."

Marlie gave a shriek of delight. "YES!!! We're back in the lead! There's no way they'll ever get that back! I'm safe, I'm safe, I'm safe!" She began to dance with joy.

"You most certainly are, Lovegood." said a voice from behind them. Luella turned to see it was a grinning Draco Malfoy. He gazed up at the points total. "And I didn't even have to blackmail him. Potter must have managed this one all on his own. Remind me to congratulate him when I see him." He sauntered off into the Great Hall.

The next to notice were the Weasley twins. Fred and George grinned at them.

"Hello, folks." Fred grinned. "Still trying to convince yourselves you can win it?"

The girls all grinned back. "Not exactly." Marlie purred. "More like, trying to convince ourselves that you were ever in with a chance."

The twins frowned. "What's that meant to mean, Lovegood?" George asked, puzzled.

Deanna raised her eyebrows. "You mean you haven't heard yet? We've got our lead back. You boys are in last place."

"Last place?" both boys shrieked. Fred elbowed his way past. "Let me see." He looked at the Gryffindor glass and his face fell. George came to see for himself and gazed in horror.

"It can't be true." Fred whispered. "There must be some kind of mistake."

"Oh, no mistake." Rianne gloated. "We're back to our winning ways."

George looked at them in frantic disbelief. "But 150 points gone in one night? How?"

"You might want to ask your little Seeker star." said Deanna coolly. "I believe he and his friends were caught out of bounds last night. Now, we're off to enjoy our breakfasts. Bye bye, Weasleys." She led the other three into the Great Hall, leaving the twins staring in horror.

Deanna and Marlie gazed around the hall as they entered. Marlie spotted Harry immediately, despite his best efforts to look unobtrusive.

"Harry!" she squealed. "Darling, let me be the first to congratulate you!" Harry went bright red and wished the ground would swallow him up. Next to him, Hermione hid her eyes while Ron seethed furiously. "You've just saved my place on the team and our Cup hopes! Sweetie, how can I ever repay you!"

"I must say, Potter," Deanna remarked, "150 points lost in one night, that's got to be some kind of record. What did you do, try and steal the Cup?"

"Hermione and me got caught out of bounds and lost fifty points each. Neville was out as well." Harry said bitterly. "Now please go away. I've already heard it all from Malfoy."

"Will do, Potter." Deanna said cheerily. "We just wanted to congratulate you. Losing that many points in one night, that's some achievement. Not even we've lost that many before."

"Not even the twins have lost that many before." Rianne added.

"This is the best day of my life!" Marlie sighed as the girls left them to their breakfasts and the accusing stares of their housemates. "Oh, happy, happy day!"

"One for the annals of Hogwarts history." agreed Rianne. "Do you reckon there's some kind of prize we can give him?"

"How about a replica of the House Cup with a little thank you message on it?" suggested Deanna. "Something like, 'We couldn't have done it without you, love Slytherin House.'"

"I take it you four have heard the news, then." Snape said from behind them, amused.

"Oh yes." grinned Deanna, turning to face him. "Oh, we've heard alright." Luella looked at their House Master. His habitual sneer had been replaced by a cruel grin.

"Isn't it wonderful, sir?" enthused Marlie. "We'll surely win it now!"

"No doubt. Although I'm sure it's quite unnecessary to find a replica of the House Cup for him. A simple greetings card will suffice, I'm sure."

"Now that's an idea." Deanna said thoughtfully.

"Dee, leave him alone. The poor kid's suffered enough." said Luella sharply. The other four turned to look at her. Snape in particular was regarding her very curiously indeed. Luella began to wish she hadn't said anything.

"Sheesh, I was just kidding." Deanna said, surprised. "As if I'd rub it in like that."

"I had no idea you were so magnanimous in victory." Snape said. "You surprise me."

Luella avoided his eyes. "Well, I feel kind of sorry for him." she mumbled.

"Indeed." Snape said dryly. He turned to go. "Well, I shall let you enjoy your meal. Good day, children."

Luella noticed her friends giving her strange looks. "What?" she snapped.

"What's up with you, Lu?" Marlie said in amazement. "We're dead certs to win again, and you're off feeling sorry for Potter? If he's silly enough to get himself caught out of bounds, that's his hard luck. Come on, brekky."

Luella shot Harry a look of concern as she followed her friends to the Slytherin table. Already, she could see empty seats next to Harry, Ron and Hermione. They're shunning him already, she thought. Poor kid. She looked away guiltily, unable to meet Harry's eyes, and went to sit down.

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Chapter Twelve Out of Bounds

Weeks turned into months. Spring became summer. The term passed away, the exams came and went, and finally the last week of term came round.

Marlie stretched back on the grass with a sigh. It was a gorgeously sunny June day, and Marlie had removed her Hogwarts robes to reveal a tight-fitting black t-shirt with 'something witchy this way comes' emblazoned across the chest and a pair of denim shorts. She was now engaged in getting a tan and relaxing.

"All over for another year! And once again, we're going to win."

"Don't count your chickens, Marls." Rianne warned her. "If Gryffindor beat Ravenclaw tomorrow, it could be a close run thing." She was still wearing her Hogwarts uniform, but a couple of Cooling Charms had put paid to over heating.

"Not close enough, thanks to the Boy Who Got Caught." Deanna grinned. "Quit worrying. Just enjoy the feeling of being back on top again." Like Marlie, she'd discarded her robes in favour of summer gear, although her Iron Maiden t-shirt couldn't have been more of a contrast with Marlie's ultra-girly look. Deanna had recently been converted to the joys of heavy metal, much to her dorm mates' chagrin.

Marlie sighed with sheer happiness. "No work to do. Slytherin dead certs to win the Cup. The sun's out. Doesn't get much better, does it?"

Next to her, Luella sneezed. "Trust me, it could." she muttered. "If I didn't have this wretched hayfever." She reached for another tissue and wiped her eyes.

"Lu, stop rubbing them." Rianne told her. "You'll only make it worse."

"They itch!" said Luella irritably. "What am I meant to do, just leave them? God, I hate this time of year. Honestly, it was my birthday yesterday, and the day was practically ruined because I couldn't stop sneezing." She blew her nose. "Screw this, where's the nearest chemist?"

"Glasgow." said Deanna.

"God almighty." Luella pounded the ground in frustration. She suddenly noticed that Deanna seemed unaffected by the pollen count. "Wait a second. You're normally worse off than me! What's your secret?"

Deanna gave her a patronising look. "Muggle-borns. Always overlooking the obvious." She produced a small phial from her robes. "Hayfever potion. Got Snape to brew some for me. He seemed happy enough to. Apparently he always makes up a huge batch in April, he gets so many Slytherins asking him for some."

"You mean you've been letting me suffer like this since May!" Luella said in disbelief. "Deanna Tyler, you little... Does he have any left?"

"Loads." Deanna yawned. "Go ask him, I'm sure he'll be quite obliging."

"Right. See you guys later. When you next see me, I shall be the all-new, non-suffering, pollen-free Luella Martin and I shall be giving Deanna Tyler the kicking of her life for not telling me sooner." Luella got up. Marlie called her back.

"Lu, while you're up, can you get some CDs for us?"

"CDs??"

"And my portable stereo as well, if you could. I fancy some tunes on."

Luella shook her head in amazement. "Marlie Lovegood, if there's anyone lazier than you in the school, I'd like to meet them. Shall I get you an ice cream as well? Perhaps a glass of Coke with ice in it, and little parasols and glace cherries on cocktail sticks as well, hmm?"

"If you could, Lu." Marlie grinned as she pulled her sunglasses back over her eyes and lay back. Sighing, Luella set off for the school.

Luella staggered back in to the Entrance Hall. A bagful of CDs, Marlie's specially adapted stereo, and enough hayfever potion to knock out a small animal did not exactly weigh lightly on her shoulders.

She stopped near the doors to massage some life back into her shoulder and give herself a rest. And immediately heard voices coming from the steps outside.

"Why me?" Hermione was demanding. Luella pricked up her ears in interest.

"It's obvious." said Ron. "You can pretend to be waiting for Professor Flitwick, you know." He switched to an unnervingly accurate falsetto. "Oh, Professor Flitwick, I'm so worried, I think I got question fourteen b wrong..."

"Oh, shut up." Hermione snapped. "All right, I'll keep an eye on Snape. What are you two going to do?"

Keep an eye on Snape? Luella began to have a horrible feeling about this. Harry was speaking again.

"We'd better stay outside the third-floor corridor. Come on, Ron." They began to walk in. Hastily, Luella willed them not to see her. They walked right past her, oblivious. Hermione ran off towards the staff-room, while Harry and Ron disappeared upstairs. Luella watched them go in concern, before picking up her things and hurrying out.

"Did you get them?" Marlie asked as Luella dumped her bag and the stereo next to her.

"No, I thought I'd carry this thing around with me for the fun of it." Luella said. "I got your Sixties CD, Hits of 1991, Now 20, Like A Prayer, Slippery When Wet, and to keep Deanna the metalhead happy, Appetite For Destruction. And if anyone wants any more, they can get their own. I'm officially knackered." She flung herself down on the warm grass.

"GNR! Cool!" Deanna grinned. Putting the CD on, the air was soon rent by the opening chords of "Welcome to the Jungle".

"Deanna!" Marlie and Rianne yelled at her. Marlie peered over her Ray-Bans at Luella.

"Lu, why did you have to inflict that noise on us? Couldn't you have got Abba instead?"

Deanna looked indignant. "This is a classic album, I'll have you know."

"Compared to what? Cars being crushed? Because that's what it sounds like!" sneered Marlie.

"Huh! Some people have no taste." Deanna sniffed. But she did agree to turn the volume down.

Luella meanwhile had other things on her mind. So Harry and Ron were watching the third floor corridor while Hermione kept tabs on the staff room. That could only mean one thing. They knew about the Stone. She stared broodily into the lake. Not only did they know it was there, they also knew someone was after it. And knowing them like she did, the chances of them trying to intervene were high. They'll get themselves killed! she thought. They don't stand a chance against that dog, and I bet there's other things there too. She remembered Mrs. Tyler telling her to stay out of things, it was too dangerous. And Rianne making her promise not to go venturing out after hours again. But on the other hand, she hadn't actually promised to mind her own business, had she? Just said that she didn't have any plans to do it again. And at the time, she hadn't...

Which is why a black-clad Luella Martin slipped quietly out of the Slytherin common room unnoticed and unnoticeable later that night, and raced straight up to the third floor, using the secret passage she'd used before. Walking to the door, her heart sank to see it was already open. She peered inside. The dog was asleep but stirring, close to wakefulness. The trapdoor had been left open and a small harp was lying next to it. Looks like someone had got there first.

She was distracted by footsteps coming down the corridor. Backing away from the door, she turned to see who was coming. No one. And yet she could hear these footsteps.

She backed away, drew her wand and waited. The footsteps drew nearer and nearer. Then stopped. Suddenly, there was a swish of material, and Harry, Ron and Hermione were there. Harry was rolling a cloak of some kind up. He turned to the others.

"If you want to go back, I won't blame you. You can take the cloak, I won't need it now."

"Don't be stupid." said Ron.

"We're coming." said Hermione.

"No, you're not." Luella said meaningfully, dropping all camouflage. "You'll stay well out of this if you know what's good for you."

The three Gryffindors spun round. Luella got a quiet kick out of seeing the stunned looks on their faces.

"You!" gasped Harry.

"That's right. Me." Luella gave them her most piercing stare. "Don't even bother lying to me, Harry. I know what you're after. I think I know why you're doing it too. But I'm telling you, if you know what's good for you, you'll go back to your dorms now."

"Don't threaten us, Martin!" Ron snapped. "You're outnumbered and your dueller mate's not here now, is she?"

"I'm not threatening you. I'm warning you. Stay out of it, it's far too dangerous, you'll get yourselves killed!" She gave them a pleading look.

Harry shook his head. "Luella, you don't understand. There's a Philosopher's Stone in there, it can make you immortal. Professor Snape's gone in there to steal it, he's working for You-Know-Who and he's trying to bring him back! If we don't stop him, You-Know-Who'll kill us all!"

"Snape?" Luella would have laughed if the situation hadn't been so desperate. "Harry, it can't be, Snape wouldn't do that. I know you don't like him much," here Ron scoffed hollowly, "but he's not evil! He wouldn't be working for Voldemort."

Hermione shook her head. "He tried to kill Harry at the Quidditch match. And Harry heard him threatening Quirrell trying to find out how to get past some of the enchantments. I know he's your House Master and all, but that doesn't change the fact he's on the other side!"

Luella shook her head. Now that someone else was actually accusing Snape, she was suddenly aware of how much she wanted to defend him. And certain, certain beyond doubt that he was no more in league with Voldemort than she was. She remembered his eyes gazing into hers after she'd been attacked by Voldemort, the emotions she'd seen there. The way he'd carried her back to his office and comforted her. The pride he'd shown after she'd fought Voldemort off.

"You're wrong." she whispered. "You're wrong!" She shook herself. "I'm sorry, Harry. But I can't let you go through that door. You'll be killed. I'm really sorry about this." She raised her wand. However, Hermione was quicker. "*Locomotor Mortis!*"

Luella yelled as her legs shot together and buckled underneath her. Ron swiftly stepped forward, grabbed her wand and threw it out of her reach.

"Right." he said confidently. "That's sorted that out. Let's go."

Hermione looked miserably at her as she followed the boys through the door. "I'm sorry, Luella." she whispered. Then she was gone.

Luella could only stare in disbelief. "You little bastards!" she whispered, trying to crawl towards her wand. She began to laugh helplessly. Bested by a group of first years! If only Deanna could see this. Still, you had to hand it to them. For a bunch of Gryffindors, they fought like Slytherins, and she could think of no better compliment.

For the second time that night she heard footsteps approaching. This time, she didn't bother trying to hide. Rolling over, she gazed straight into Filch's eyes. And for once, she was actually pleased to see him.

"Well, well, well." he whispered, eyes gleaming. "Out of bed and out of bounds. And Professor Snape always told me how law-abiding you were. He's not going to be happy with you."

Luella clutched at this straw of hope. No, Snape wasn't going to be happy, but he was her best chance.

"You're absolutely right, Mr. Filch." she said gazing back at him. "I've behaved appallingly badly. I deserve to be expelled. Thrown out. Sent packing. I am the shame of Hogwarts. In fact, we may as well get it over with. I insist you fetch Professor Snape now. Let me be punished, wretch that I am!"

Filch looked startled. He'd never had a student actually want to be punished before.

"You... you actually want punishing? You actually want me to get Professor Snape?"

"Of course. I deserve nothing less. I am an unreformable delinquent. I deserve nothing less than the most vehement sarcasm he can come up with. In fact, I deserve worse."

Filch backed away, looking at her as if she'd gone mad. "Worse than sarcasm? What, you want *irony*?"

"Well, it'll do at a pinch, but I'm sure it won't be enough for someone as corrupt as me."

Filch's eyes bulged. "You surely can't mean... surely not... *satire*?"

Luella bowed her head. "I deserve nothing but the very worst."

Filch couldn't take it in. "You want Professor Snape to be satirical at you? You actually *want* him to use *satire*??" He looked terrified.

"Yes please." Luella said calmly. "So, er, can you get him then?"

"Erm, yes, yes of course, I'll be right back." Filch took a few steps backwards before turning and running off.

Luella grinned to herself. This manipulation lark wasn't nearly so hard as she'd thought.

She lay there in the darkness for what seemed like hours. Finally, she heard footsteps coming towards her. Turning gratefully towards the sound, she smiled as Snape came striding up the corridor, wand in hand. He performed the counter charm and waited while Luella got to her feet and retrieved her wand.

She looked nervously at him. He didn't exactly look angry, more intrigued.

"Mr. Filch tells me you wanted me to use satire on you. Is that true?"

"Um. Not really, no."

"Relieved to hear it. If it was, I'd have to wonder about you. As it is, you've left the poor man quite unsettled. I had to give him a Nerve-Calming Potion before he could tell me anything." His expression changed to a rather less friendly one. "So. Miss Martin. I'm sure there's a perfectly reasonable explanation for your presence out of bed after curfew, just outside a strictly out-of-bounds area with the Leg-Locker Curse on you, but I'm having difficulty thinking of one at the moment. Be so kind as to acquaint me with the story behind it. If it's sufficiently entertaining, I might even be so lenient as to excuse you from detention."

Luella recalled what she was doing there in the first place. "Professor, it's Harry, Ron and Hermione. They've gone after the Philosopher's Stone, they think someone's trying to steal it!"

"What?? How on earth... Never mind." He looked sharply at the open door. Luella watched as his face went pale. "Oh gods. They're in there, you say?"

"Yeah. And I think someone else is in there too, because the door was open before they arrived."

She hadn't thought Snape could look any more horrified, but she was wrong. He turned swiftly to her. "We haven't a moment to lose. Come to my office immediately."

Snape didn't say anything else to her as he led her back to the dungeons. He was walking so fast she had trouble keeping up. She followed him to his office and sat

down. Snape said nothing to her, just threw a handful of what looked like Floo powder into the fire and called "Caitlin Tyler at the DDAE. Secure line. Password Dream Weaver."

Mrs. Tyler's face appeared in the flames. Luella gave an involuntary start.

"Severus, I was just about to call you! Albus Dumbledore's just turned up here wanting to know why we owled him. Which we most certainly didn't. What is going on?"

Snape's face was grimmer than Luella had ever seen it. "Caitlin, he's done it. He's gone after the Stone tonight. You've got to send Albus back here immediately. Use this connection if you like."

"OK, we'll be right there." Mrs. Tyler said levelly, although she looked worried.

"That's not all. Potter, Granger and Weasley have gone in there after him."

"What?" she screamed. "Severus, why didn't you stop them??"

"I didn't find out until they'd already gone in." he said testily. "And Albus is the only one who knows how to get past all the enchantments. I'm not getting the other leg nearly ripped off too."

Mrs. Tyler shook her head. "OK. Whatever. I'm on my way." She disappeared. Moments later, the fire flared green and Mrs. Tyler was there in person. She was quickly followed by Professor Dumbledore. Both had their wands out.

"Well? Where are they?" Mrs. Tyler said coldly. She noticed Luella standing there. "Luella? What are you doing out of bed?"

"She was the one who raised the alarm." Snape said quietly. "Albus, Caitlin, we have to go after them, there's no way three first years can take on Quirrell and Voldemort, even with the latter in his current weakened state."

Dumbledore nodded. "Very well, Severus. Let's go. I want you both with me."

Snape nodded. He turned to Luella. "You had best go to bed. I'll talk with you further tomorrow."

However, Dumbledore overruled him. "No, bring her. If she fought off Voldemort once, she may be able to do it again. Come, we have no time to lose." With that, he led them off. Luella, not at all sorry to be invited along, raced after them.

Dumbledore led them straight to the statue of Morgan LeFay. "There's a passage here which will take us straight there. Severus, I daresay you know of it already, but Caitlin and Miss Martin won't."

"Yes, I do." Luella and Mrs. Tyler said automatically. They both looked at each other in surprise. Snape and Mrs. Tyler immediately started to grin. Luella began to wish she'd kept quiet. Dumbledore just raised an eyebrow.

"Is anything secret around here anymore?"

"Um, Mel found out about it from Remus." Caitlin said, blushing.

"The Weasley twins told me." Luella admitted.

"Not that you've ever had cause to use it, Miss Martin." Snape said sternly.

"Of course not, sir." said Luella innocently. Snape didn't say anything, just watched as Dumbledore opened the entrance and led them inside.

They emerged a few minutes later on the third floor. Dumbledore stepped forward and prepared to open the door. However, he didn't get the chance.

The door burst open and Ron and Hermione staggered out. They pulled up short to see the four of them there. And when they saw Snape, their jaws dropped.

"You!" gasped Ron. He stared wildly. "But you're meant to be... I mean, aren't you..." He stopped short, dumbfounded.

Luella grinned. "See? Told you it wasn't him." She looked around. "Where's Harry?" she asked in surprise.

"Where indeed." Snape said dryly. "And shouldn't you two be in bed?" He was giving them his most dangerous look.

Dumbledore stepped in. "He's gone after him, hasn't he?" Ron and Hermione nodded. Dumbledore turned to the three adults. "We can't lose any more time. Mr. Weasley, Miss Granger, return to your dorms now." Ron and Hermione, after registering the looks Snape was giving them, turned tail and ran. Dumbledore strode towards the door. He never made it.

Luella felt it strike again. Once again, she felt Voldemort's rage and animosity hit her, except this time it felt different. As if it wasn't actually aimed at her, but was strong enough for her to feel. She sank to the floor clutching her head in pain.

"Get off me!" she hissed to no one in particular. Snape spun round and dropped to her side instantly.

"Oh my god, Luella, are you all right?" Mrs. Tyler gasped. Snape gently held Luella's hands in his own.

"It's happening again." he said quietly. "Luella, fight it!"

Dumbledore turned to Mrs. Tyler. "Caitlin, you and I will have to go alone. Severus, stay with her, help her fight him. She can do it as effectively from here as she could down there. Caitlin?"

Mrs. Tyler bit her lip but said nothing, just following Dumbledore through the door, leaving Snape and Luella alone.

Luella struggled furiously. "Damn you, get off me, get out of my head!" she snarled. Eyes shut tight, clutching at her hair, she writhed in pain. Snape desperately tried to keep hold of her, but every time he went near her, she just screamed even louder and pulled away.

"Luella, talk to me." he said desperately. "What's happening?"

Luella gathered her wits long enough to answer. "Voldemort." she hissed. "He's here, he's fighting me." She paused. "No, that's not true, he's fighting someone else." Her eyes widened. "*Harry!*" She staggered to her feet. "I have to go and help him!"

Snape grabbed her wrist. "Don't be so foolish, girl. Professor Dumbledore and Caitlin Tyler are there, do you think you can do anything they can't?"

"I'm the Redeemer, it's my job to fight him!" she snarled, breaking free in her rage and desperation. However, she felt her knees buckle as the hate from Voldemort intensified. Snape caught her as she fell and lowered her to the floor.

"Do you see what I mean? What you are receiving from him at the moment would kill you or drive you mad before you reached him. Your best, your only option, is to fight from here. Like I showed you before, like you have done before. Take the rage and hate, add your own and send it back! Let him feel your fury!" he hissed, staring into her eyes. Luella stared wildly back at him, her features contorted with anger. Snape flinched to look at her. Luella laughed harshly.

"Damn him. All right. He'll feel it. He'll feel every single thing I can throw at him!" She spun to face the door and concentrated harder than she'd ever done before, feeling rage pour out of her. Pain seared through her head, and the world span. She dimly heard Snape calling her name in alarm before the pain in her head intensified and the world went dark.

Caitlin raced after Dumbledore, as he performed the shortcut charms that enabled them to bypass the various obstacles. She noticed a huge Devil's Snare plant, a giant chess set, little keys fluttering around, and a set of potions accompanied by a tricky little logic puzzle that could only have been Severus's handiwork. Finally, Dumbledore had navigated them all, and led her into the room containing the last enchantment.

Caitlin, despite her years of Auror work, nearly screamed when she saw the sight in front of her. Harry and Professor Quirrell were locked in combat, wrestling on the floor. Quirrell was screaming, desperately trying to break free of Harry, who had grabbed his face and was holding grimly on, grimacing in pain. However, that was not what had alarmed her.

Quirrell's turban was off him, and in the back of his head was a face. A white face. With slits for nostrils and a pair of red eyes she knew only too well.

"Oh my god." she whispered. Forgetting her Auror training she raced forward. "Harry! *Harry!*" she screamed. An invisible shield caught her, flinging her backwards into Dumbledore's arms. Gasping, she struggled to her feet.

"A protective ward." he said quietly. "We can't get near him unless something happens to break it down. Nor can we cast any spells, they'll just bounce right back at us. We need to distract Voldemort somehow."

Caitlin wrung her hands. "How?" she whispered.

"That's what I was hoping Miss Martin could do. However, if Severus has taught her well, we might not need her here." Dumbledore said cryptically.

Caitlin stared at him. "What do you mean...?" She was interrupted by a piercing scream. Spinning round, she gasped.

Voldemort's face was contorted in agony. It was he who was screaming. "Nooo!" he howled. "Stop! Get out of my head, damn you, bitch!" he snarled. Quirrell screamed in a grotesque parody of harmony, desperately trying to thrust Harry away from him.

"That's what I was waiting for!" Dumbledore gasped, racing forward. Sure enough, he was able to pull Quirrell off Harry, sending him sprawling. Turning to the now unconscious Gryffindor, he cupped the boy's face in his hands.

A movement caught Caitlin's eye. On the far side of the chamber, Quirrell was clambering to his feet and reaching for his wand, preparing to throw a deadly curse at the distracted Dumbledore. Caitlin didn't hesitate as years of training came in to play. She lifted her wand as if in a trance and pointed it at him, feeling the power flow as the words came to her lips all by themselves.

"*Avada Kedavra!*" Green light flashed and a silent, invisible killer raced straight towards a horrified Quirrell.

"Nooo!" he screamed as the curse hit him. He fell to the floor immediately. Caitlin didn't even bother checking his pulse. When she used the Killing Curse, it worked. Distastefully, she kicked him over to check the back of his head. Voldemort had vanished. Cursing, she turned to see Dumbledore facing her, a look of shock on his face.

"What?" she snapped. "Never seen an Auror in action before?"

"You killed him!" he whispered. Getting to his feet, he stared at her in disbelief. "You actually killed him!"

Caitlin shrugged. "He's a Dark wizard. I'm Deputy Head of the DDAE. I've got licence to kill. And he would not have shown you any mercy, Albus."

"You could have stunned him, Caitlin." Dumbledore said gently.

Caitlin paused, staring at Quirrell. When she spoke, her voice had lost its harshness and sounded far softer. "He tried to kill my godson. He would have killed you. He'd literally let Voldemort into his very soul. There lies the difference between our respective houses, Albus. We don't forgive easily. And we don't do mercy very well. I assure you, Severus would have done the same. As would Melissa."

Dumbledore gazed sorrowfully at her. "But at what cost, Caitlin?"

She didn't answer. Instead, she knelt next to Harry. "Will he be all right, Albus?" she whispered.

"I don't know. He's alive, but only just. Had we arrived any later, he wouldn't have made it." He began searching the boy's pockets. "I need to know if he managed to retrieve the Stone. Wait a second, ah, here it is." He brandished the Stone triumphantly. "Nicolas will be relieved." A shadow fell over his face. "Yet also saddened. We can't allow the Stone to continue to exist, you know. It's just too dangerous."

Caitlin nodded mutely. "Will he agree, do you know?"

"I think so. He was saying only the other day how bored he was getting of immortality. I'm of the opinion that he'd actually like to see what death's like. It's the only thing he hasn't tried yet."

"I've got friends like that." Caitlin grinned. Her smile faded as she remembered which ones. "Had friends like that." she corrected. She gazed around the room and noticed the Mirror of Erised for the first time. "Now Albus, you never did tell us exactly what you wanted that for." she said, intrigued.

"Ah, now I'm glad you noticed that." Dumbledore beamed. "Part of the enchantment protecting the Stone. Only one who looks in the Mirror and wants to find the Stone, find but not use it, can get hold of it. Everyone else will just see themselves making elixir or something similar. Ingenious, isn't it?"

Caitlin smiled. "Albus, you're as cunning as a Slytherin. Very devious." She stepped up to the Mirror, suddenly curious. She gazed into its depths. And stepped back, hand clutched to her mouth in horror. Dumbledore stared at her in concern.

"Caitlin? What is it?"

Caitlin, speechless, just shook her head in disbelief. She turned to look at Harry again. "Help me with him, he needs to go to the hospital wing. Maybe Severus can do

something." Dumbledore did not question her further, just conjured up a stretcher for Harry and lifted him on to it. Caitlin followed them out, holding herself, and trying not to think of what she'd just seen. Trying not to think of those hands caressing her skin, those dark, almost hypnotic, eyes gazing into hers, those lips passionately kissing her senseless... Not him. Please, not him. Anyone but him, she thought desperately. He can't be my heart's desire, he can't be! Not after all this time. And yet, the image of Severus Snape pulling her to him and kissing her wildly continued to haunt her long after she'd left the Mirror behind.

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Chapter Thirteen The Gift of the Fae

Luella woke up slowly. Such a strange dream she'd had, involving sneaking out at night, getting the Leg-Locker Curse thrown at her by Hermione, freaking out Filch so he'd get Snape, racing through the school with Dumbledore, Snape and Mrs. Tyler, then Voldemort attacking her again. Weird. Maybe she was ill. In fact, now that she came to think about it, her head was aching, and she felt really exhausted. Yeah, that'd be it. Flu.

She became dimly aware of voices. A man and a woman.

"She'll make it. She has to." the woman was saying. "Come on, you've done everything humanly possible for her."

"What if she doesn't?" the man was saying. Poor thing, Luella thought, he sounds worried sick. "What if she dies? What if it was too much for her? Gods, Caitlin, did I push her too far? Expose her to too much? She's only just fourteen, that must have been such a drain on her powers, grown mages would have suffered."

"Severus, she's the Redeemer. She can't die yet, she's got a destiny to fulfil."

"What if that encounter was it?? What if she's done it now? There's nothing in the prophecy saying the Redeemer'll survive the final battle. How on earth am I going to break the news to her parents? To her friends? How the hell is Deanna going to take something like that? Caitlin, I honestly don't think I could live with myself if she doesn't make it."

Luella opened her eyes. She was in a bed in the hospital wing, screens pulled round her. Next to the bed, Mrs. Tyler was sitting down, watching Professor Snape pacing the floor restlessly. He looked more anxious than she'd ever seen him, looking like he'd not slept or shaved in days.

The events of last night came rushing back to her. Oh gods, Harry...

"Mrs. Tyler?" she whispered. Mrs. Tyler turned round immediately.

"Luella! You're awake!" Her face lit up. On the other side of the bed, Professor Snape spun round. The look of sheer relief on his face as he slumped into a chair took at least ten years off his age. Luella felt that strange tingle go running up her spine again.

"Thank the fates you made it." Snape whispered. "We thought..." He gestured dismissively. "Doesn't matter. You're awake again. That's all that matters."

Luella pulled herself into a sitting position and rubbed her head. It was daylight, so obviously she'd been out for a few hours.

"My head." she groaned. "What happened? Last thing I remember is lashing out at Voldemort then passing out... Is Harry all right? Did you get the Stone? What happened to Quirrell?" Luella's voice rose urgently. Oh my god, is Harry OK? she thought wildly.

"One thing at a time, Luella." Mrs. Tyler said gently. "Yes, we got the Stone back. Yes, Harry's fine, Professor Dumbledore's with him now. As for Quirrell..." here she exchanged an amused look with Snape. "He, er, had a little accident while resisting arrest. I don't think you need worry about him any more."

"Somehow he managed to find himself on the wrong end of an Auror's wand." Snape said, grinning. "Freak accident, could have happened to anyone."

"Poor thing." Luella said. "Is he all right?"

"Um. Depends how you define all right. He's not actually in any pain, if that's what you mean." Mrs. Tyler said evasively.

"However, if you define all right as in having a pulse and breathing, then no, he's not all right." Snape remarked dryly, appearing to have recovered himself.

Luella's eyes widened. "You mean he's dead?"

"Er. Yes." Mrs. Tyler said.

Luella let this sink in. "What, really dead?"

"Yes, really dead." Snape said. "Pushing up the daisies, snuffed it, kicked the bucket. He has moved on into the world beyond. One more entry in the obituary column of life, one less sand-timer in the Grim Reaper's cottage. If he were any deader, Messrs. Idle, Palin, Jones, Chapman and Cleese would be writing a satirical sketch about him. Yes, he is definitely, truly, absolutely dead."

"And you killed him?" Luella said to Mrs. Tyler, amazed.

Mrs. Tyler hung her head guiltily and nodded.

Luella gazed in awe. "Cool!" she whispered.

Snape rolled his eyes. "Caitlin, I think we can definitely pronounce this one recovered. Miss Martin, you may return to your common room at your leisure. I daresay your friends will be quite relieved to see you again. Miss Tyler in particular has been quite concerned about you. As have we all." A shadow crossed his face again

"Concerned?" Luella asked, surprised. "I've only been unconscious for a few hours, haven't I?" She looked closely at their faces. They were giving each other 'are you going to tell her or am I?' looks. Luella began to have a very bad feeling about this. Not to mention the fact that there was no way Snape had accumulated that much stubble in one night...

"How long have I been out for?" Luella asked wearily.

"Luella, love, you were unconscious for three days." Mrs. Tyler said gently.

"Everyone's been worried sick about you. Severus has hardly left your side. He carried you up here himself."

Luella regarded Snape in amazement. She really couldn't imagine Professor Snape summoning up enough emotion to stay by someone's side for three whole days. Feeling rather embarrassed all of a sudden, she looked away. "You didn't have to do that." she mumbled.

"Think nothing of it." he said dismissively. "I would have done the same for any of my students." He paused. Something changed in his eyes as his face softened. "Well, maybe not just any of my students."

Luella felt herself going red. "Thank you, sir." she murmured quietly. Snape didn't answer, just looked away all of a sudden. Mrs. Tyler got up.

"Well, I think we'd better leave you to recuperate. Get plenty of rest and don't over-exert yourself, OK? Are you coming, Severus?"

"Right behind you, Caitlin. Quite apart from anything else, I've just realised what I must look like, and I'm in desperate need of sleep." Yawning, he followed Mrs. Tyler out. Luella lay back and closed her eyes, enjoying the warm, fuzzy feeling of knowing that Snape had been watching over her the whole time she'd been unconscious. Daydreaming about being carried to the hospital wing, she allowed herself to doze off.

She was woken up by voices coming from what she assumed was the next bed.

"Harry!" a girl shrieked. "You're OK! We've been so worried about you, Dumbledore thought you were going to -" The girl, who Luella's tired mind was alert enough to recognise as Hermione, broke off.

Ron's voice was next. "What happened down there, Harry? Dumbledore won't tell us, Snape certainly won't, and apparently Luella's nowhere to be found."

This mention of her own name roused her. She recalled that, respect these little first years as she did, she had a score to settle. She reached under her pillow out of habit and felt her fingers curl around what proved to be her wand. Clearly Snape knew her all too well. Sliding out of bed, she pushed the screens back and walked quietly over to the next bed, also shrouded by screens.

"Guess we really owe her an apology." Harry was saying sheepishly. "After all, she was right about Snape."

"She was indeed." Luella said dryly, pushing back the screens and stepping inside. The sight of their horrified, rather guilty faces looking back at her amused her no end. This was going to be fun. "Next time, Potter, listen to your elders. You may find this hard to believe but they do actually know more than you." She slid casually into a convenient chair.

All three of them were avoiding her gaze. Harry and Ron both mumbled something. It was Hermione who looked contritely at her.

"Lu, I'm really, really sorry I put the Leg-Locker Curse on you. And we're sorry for not listening to you. Aren't we?" She gave Harry and Ron an extremely penetrating look. Both boys mumbled apologies.

"Good." Luella said coolly. "I'm sure you had your reasons, anyhow. So come on then. I want to hear what they are. From the beginning, please. All of it. I'm waiting."

So Harry, Ron and Hermione launched into an account of the year's adventures, from discovering what was in the corridor, to Hagrid letting slip about Nicolas Flamel, to suspecting Snape after the Quidditch match against Slytherin, then the conversation Harry had overheard between Snape and Quirrell. Finally, the discovery that Voldemort was involved and the decision to go for the Stone themselves when they found out Dumbledore had been lured away. Luella nodded thoughtfully.

"So you thought Snape was after the Stone to give to Voldemort. Well, I suppose I can't blame you for suspecting him, he is a complete bastard to you all, isn't he?"

"You noticed!" Ron said sarcastically. Luella grinned.

"I'm not completely blind to his faults, Weasley. But this I do know - he's no Voldemort supporter. And I'll tell you why I believe that after you bring the story up to date. So. You immobilise me and get through the door. Then what?"

The three Gryffindors immediately launched into an account of how they'd got through the various enchantments. Luella listened, impressed. She was particularly taken with the logic puzzle that Snape had devised.

"Brilliant! Oh man, that's amazing. Professor Snape rules!" Luella grinned. She took in the looks that the others were giving her. "What? Stop looking at me like that. I happen to like him, OK? Then what happened?"

Harry took up the story, explaining how he'd sent Hermione back to get help, then gone on to face Quirrell in front of the mirror. This part was also new to Ron and Hermione, so all three listened intently, gasping with shock in all the right places. When Harry described seeing Voldemort's face in Quirrell's head, Hermione screamed, Ron looked like he was going to be sick, and even Luella was taken aback.

"In his head? Voldemort was physically part of him? God, that's gross!" She looked revolted. "No wonder I felt as bad as I did near him. No wonder! Go on, how'd you defeat him?"

So Harry explained how he'd realised Quirrell couldn't touch his skin, and used that to keep him at bay until help arrived. Which it did.

"And for which you have me to thank." Luella said tartly. "Who do you think it was who raised the alarm?"

Harry looked shocked. "But Ron, Hermione... didn't you two find Dumbledore?"

Ron shook his head. "Not us."

"No, we came out of the door to find him, Snape, Luella and Caitlin Tyler already there." Hermione said meekly.

"And your reactions on seeing Snape as part of the rescue party is the funniest thing I've seen in ages. Shame I didn't have a camera on me." Luella grinned. "Yes, Snape was perfectly innocent all along. After you lot had gone in, I got found by Filch. Who was his usual snide self. However, by beating him at his own game and practically begging to be thrown into the stocks and tortured, I was able to persuade him to fetch Snape. Well, OK, that's not strictly true. What I actually said was that I was completely corrupt and unreformable and deserved nothing less than the worst in sarcasm that Snape could throw at me."

"You actually asked for Snape to be sarcastic at you?" Ron asked, his mind boggling.

"Oh of course not, Weasley. After sufficient haggling, I was able to force it all the way up to satire."

"*Satire*???" Harry, Ron and Hermione stared at her. No doubt about it, Luella Martin was nuts.

"You know, that's exactly how Filch looked." Luella grinned. "Couldn't get away fast enough. He ran off to get Snape, who had to use several doses of Nerve-Calming Potion before he could get any sense out of him, and sure enough, Snape came to see what on earth was going on."

Ron grinned. "How many points did you lose?"

"None, he was so intrigued by the thought of someone actually wanting him to use satire, he forgot to be angry. And when I told him you'd gone after the Stone because someone else was trying to steal it, he forgot all about punishing me. Dragged me

straight back to his office, called up Mrs. Tyler, found out Dumbledore had just turned up there, got them both up here over the Floo network, and off we went. Where we ran into you two."

"What did Snape do to them?" Harry asked sharply.

"Nothing, with Dumbledore there. We just got told to go to bed." Hermione told him.

"I guess then that the four of them ran after you."

"Two." Luella corrected. "Mrs. Tyler and Dumbledore went after you. Snape and me stayed where we were. Which leads me to why I was convinced Snape's OK."

Ron snorted derisively. "Here we go. Another missive from the Professor Snape fan club."

"Ron, shut up." Hermione told him. "Go on, Luella, we're listening."

Luella felt her grin fade. How to explain why Voldemort was after her too? She wasn't at all sure she wanted to give away her secret just yet, especially not in the hospital wing. In the end, she decided to just give the facts and let them make up their own minds as to the reasons.

"Well Harry, you're not the only one on the Voldemort hit list. Ever since the year started, I've been getting these panic attacks. Really bad ones. And nightmares too, nightmares that someone, someone with red eyes, is after me, trying to kill me. And that day I collapsed in the Great Hall, that was when they hit their peak."

"We thought Snape was psychically attacking you." Harry said quietly.

Luella raised an eyebrow. "Hardly. I'm one of his top Slytherins, why is he going to attack me?"

"That's what I said!" Hermione pouted.

Harry was unrepentant. "Well, we thought he was after the Stone! Except we didn't know about the Stone then, but we knew something valuable was up there. We thought he was trying to force you to co-operate, to help him steal it."

"And then after, when you seemed so confident all of a sudden, we thought you'd caved in and he'd bewitched you." Hermione admitted.

Luella began to smile. "No wonder you didn't want to tell me about Nicolas Flamel! Good thing you did, though, I'd never have worked it all out if you hadn't."

"Yeah, Herm, what were you thinking of?" Ron snapped.

"I don't know!" Hermione said fretfully. "It was weird, I was determined not to say anything, but then I heard this weird voice in my head saying, tell her, tell her, and I found myself asking."

Luella briefly debated whether or not to tell Hermione about her mysterious Redeemer powers but decided against it.

"Well, whatever. You asked me and I went off to check with Deanna. Who, it turned out, knew exactly who Flamel was and why he was famous. And when I heard he was involved with a Philosopher's Stone, the penny dropped."

"Didn't tell us though, did you?" said Ron sourly.

"Well of course not!" said Luella, exasperated. "I knew by then that Voldemort was around, didn't I? The last thing I wanted you lot to do was to get involved! It wasn't some schoolkid adventure we're talking about, you know. We're talking about the return of Lord Voldemort!" She watched as Ron and Hermione flinched at the mention of the name. "Oh don't be such wusses. Good god, if you can't even bear to hear his name, how the hell are you ever going to fight him?"

"And how would you know?" Ron snapped. "You're Muggle-born, you don't know what it was like under him, you haven't heard your parents whispering about what those years were like!"

"True. But then, when you've fought him yourself, you don't need to." Luella's voice took on a sense of urgency. "Who do you think was behind my panic attacks? Voldemort. I don't know why, but he hates me. He wants to kill me. He very nearly got his wish, those attacks almost pushed me to the edge. Almost. Fortunately, Snape got to me first."

"Fortunately?" Harry raised an eyebrow.

"I'd rather face You-Know-Who, to be honest." Ron commented.

"That, Ron Weasley, just goes to show that you don't know what you're talking about!" Luella snarled at him. "I tell you, Snape saved my sanity. He taught me how to conquer fear. How to find my power. How to fight back. He told me that Quirrell was in league with Voldemort. And helped me respond with a few attacks of my own. Quirrell was off sick for three days after Snape was through teaching me, and I wasn't bothered again. And you all noticed the difference in me. And that is why I know that Snape is on our side."

"So... he wasn't trying to force you to help him steal the Stone then?" Ron said uncertainly.

"No."

"He was actually helping you fight You-Know-Who?" Hermione asked, stunned.

"Yes."

"But why would Snape go to all that trouble over you?" Harry asked in surprise. "And why does Voldemort want to kill you anyway?"

Good question, Luella thought. And for once, her natural Slytherin cunning had failed to come up with a decent excuse.

"No idea." she said lightly. "He's Lord Voldemort, does he need a reason? Probably annoyed that the top Slytherin in my year's a common Muggle-born. As for Snape going to all that trouble, you misjudge him! And you've forgotten four rather salient facts. I'm Slytherin. He's Head of Slytherin. He has a responsibility towards me he doesn't have towards you. And probably the most important thing, which you may find hardest to believe but still, Snape likes me! Ron, stop looking so repulsed. I'm one of Snape's favourite students. He will do things for me he wouldn't even consider doing for anyone else. Yes, it's not fair, but that's how he is. Will do anything for people he likes, is a complete bastard to everyone else."

"You don't say." Ron muttered darkly.

"Never mind that." Harry interrupted. "Why didn't you and Snape follow Caitlin Tyler and Dumbledore? You never did tell us that. And what did happen in the chamber? I remember someone screaming my name and someone pulling Quirrell off me then I passed out."

"Well, I don't know all of it as I was rather indisposed myself. But I'll tell you what I remember, and what little Snape and Mrs. Tyler told me." Luella steadied herself as the memory came flooding back. "Before I could get near the door, Voldemort attacked again. Well, he wasn't attacking me. He was attacking you, Harry, and I could feel the hate and the rage. And Dumbledore decided there was no way I could go any further, so he left me with Snape. Good thing he did. Snape helped me fight back like I'd done before. It appeared to work, but it was too much for me and I passed out. Don't remember anything else." Luella moved swiftly on, rather glad to have got that part out of the way.

"Anyway, next thing I knew, I was up here with Mrs. Tyler and Professor Snape watching over me. Turned out I've been unconscious for three days. I still don't know exactly what went on down there, but you'll all be relieved to know we got the Stone back, and Quirrell got his just desserts."

"Dumbledore told me Quirrell died after Voldemort left him." Harry said quietly.

Luella coughed delicately. "Did he? Well, I suppose he must have done. I heard that Quirrell accidentally managed to find himself on the wrong end of an Auror's wand, but never mind."

Hermione's eyes widened. "Caitlin Tyler killed him?"

"Well, if you want to put it like that, yes, although I personally think that trying to kill an innocent boy in front of the Deputy Head of the DDAE counts as suicide." said Luella.

"She really killed him?" Ron asked, openmouthed.

"Bloody hell, they were right about Gryffindors being slow on the uptake. Yes, Weasley, she killed him. Like I just said two seconds ago."

Ron and Hermione just stared at her. Then as one, they both said "Wow!"

Luella sauntered leisurely along the corridors of Hogwarts, heading back to her common room. Life felt pretty good. No sign of Voldemort anywhere that she could tell. The Stone destroyed and now out of reach. Quirrell dead and unable to hurt her again. And best of all, Harry's three days in the hospital wing meant Gryffindor had had to play a different Seeker, which meant Ravenclaw had thrashed them, which meant Gryffindor were 120 points behind Slytherin, firmly in last place. While she felt sorry for Harry, Ron and Hermione, she just couldn't help smiling.

Until she felt it. Not a panic attack. But something else. A strange, unnerving feeling of being watched. She spun round. No one there. But she could still feel it, as if someone was looking right at her. She turned round and began walking onwards, turning past the statue of Morgan LeFay and into the dungeons.

Still the feeling of being watched wouldn't leave her. And now she could hear footsteps too. She stopped. So did they. She started walking slowly. The footsteps followed her, matching her pace exactly. She quickened her pace, and grimaced inwardly as the footsteps followed suit. Drawing her wand, she turned round, ready to fight. No one there.

The fear began to rise. She felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. "Who's there?" she hissed. "Show yourself!"

No one answered, but Luella could have sworn she heard a woman laughing. Not an evil laugh, more amusement. Familiar too. Was this some kind of joke?

"All right, you've had your fun." Luella snapped. "Come on, show yourself. Snape's office is only round the corner, it won't take me two minutes to go and find him. And I happen to know he's currently catching up on three day's worth of lost sleep, so he won't be in a good mood."

Is he ever? she thought she heard a voice telling her. I'm sure I recognise that voice, she thought. That's someone I know! She concentrated hard. There, in front of her, if she looked closely. A certain shimmering in the air. She focused on it, thinking come on, show yourself. And felt something fighting back. Luella pushed harder. A battle of wills ensued, Luella trying to get this person to show themselves, and the person refusing.

Then the voice came again, whispering gently in her ear. *You don't want to do that, Luella. You don't want to fight me, do you? Of course you don't. Why not just forget you ever felt anything and head on back to your common room?* Luella felt herself getting drowsy. What was she worried about, after all? Getting all worked up over nothing. If Deanna could see this... She was in the act of turning to go when she realised what was going on. Hold on, Lu. Isn't this...? Luella faced the slightly

shimmering patch again, the realisation dawning on her. Someone else has the same powers I do! she thought. And if that's the case...

She imagined the shimmering bit parting, fading away, dying. Fading away to reveal... The resistance suddenly gave way and Luella gasped, stumbling forward. The air stopped shimmering and a figure stepped forward. Luella felt her jaw drop. "You?"

"That's right. Me." Mrs. Tyler said easily. "Well done. Not many would have been able to do that! Congratulations. If I was authorised to give points out, you'd be getting ten of them. As it is, you'll just have to make do with the sense of achievement."

Luella felt her anger building. "What on earth do you think you were doing? You nearly scared me to death!" She was fuming. Best friend's mother or not, what the hell was Mrs. Tyler playing at?

Mrs. Tyler pouted. "Ah, Luella. I was just having a little fun. You don't want to ruin all my fun, do you?"

Luella resisted the attempt to get round her with ease. "Is that what you call it." she said flatly. "Just tell me what you were playing at. Please." she added, the habit of a lifetime's politeness being a difficult one to shake.

Mrs. Tyler became a little more serious. "All right. I was testing you. Wanted to see if it was true."

"If what was true?" Luella asked guardedly. Mrs. Tyler's charming smile faded.

"I can sense another of my kind." she said quietly. "Plus I overheard your conversation with young Harry and his friends. In particular that nice Miss Granger saying how she hadn't wanted to say anything about Nicolas Flamel to you, but then she'd heard this strange little voice telling her to tell you and had felt compelled to do it. So I thought I'd follow you and see for myself if my suspicions were correct."

Luella gulped. Mrs. Tyler was now regarding her with her motherly look. "How long have you had these powers, Luella?" she asked, gently. Luella hung her head.

"I'm not sure." she whispered. "Since my first year. That night we did Dream Weaver. Deanna didn't want to go through with it, so I looked in her eyes and told her she could do it. And she got the confidence to go ahead with it. Then a few weeks later, Marlie lost all confidence in her Quidditch skills, so I decided to try again. And it worked. I didn't use them after that, I was too scared to. Until this year when I discovered I could hide myself, stop others seeing me."

"But you can also make others notice you, really notice you, if you want to, can't you?" Mrs. Tyler said, a strange bittersweet smile on her face. "Like after you fought back at Voldemort. Severus told me how much you changed afterwards. And I knew then that it was more than just the flush of victory at work there."

Luella held herself. "What's going on, Mrs. Tyler? What's happening to me?" she whispered.

Mrs. Tyler stepped forward and hugged her. "Come on, dear. Come with me, and I'll explain everything. Let's see if Severus is capable of polysyllables yet."

As it turned out, Snape evidently wasn't, for his office door was locked and Mrs. Tyler could get no response. Sighing, she produced her wand and tapped a complicated rhythm onto it, causing it to spring open.

"He really should change the combination on this." Mrs. Tyler commented. "It's far too easy to break in and he knows what students are like." She led Luella inside and told her to sit down and wait while she slipped into Snape's private rooms.

From the other side of the door, she heard Snape swearing before realising just who'd woken him up.

"Well, hello there, Caitlin. Fancy seeing you here. Finally decided I'm just too sexy to resist?"

"As if. Get up, this is important. We need to talk."

"Can't we talk here?" Snape purred seductively.

"No. Needs to be in your office. Severus, for god's sake, put some clothes on!" Mrs. Tyler sounded quite horrified. "Oh very well, if you insist." Snape said reluctantly. A pause. "Well? Do I get any privacy? Or are you going to watch? I mean, I don't mind if you really can't take your eyes off me, but surely it's more normal to want to watch people take their clothes off?"

"Oooh, you...! I'll be waiting outside. Luella is with me, so if we could have you fully dressed, shaved and with your mind out of the gutter if that's at all possible, that would be nice. See you in five minutes."

Mrs. Tyler came out of the room seething. Luella looked at her in surprise.

"Is everything all right in there?"

Mrs. Tyler forced a nervous smile. "Yes, he's just getting out of bed now. He knows you're here so with any luck we'll be able to have a civilised conversation soon."

"Oh, OK." Luella said, hoping she sounded offhand. In reality, all sorts of quite bizarre thoughts involving Professor Snape in rather less than his usual black robes, using the sort of voice she'd just heard him address Mrs. Tyler with, were intruding on her mind. Swiftly trying to get her mind on more mundane subjects, she stared fixedly into the fire until she heard Snape enter.

"Well?" he said, irritably. "This had better be worth waking me up for."

"Oh, as if I'd disturb your beauty sleep for anything less than a real emergency." Mrs. Tyler smiled sweetly. "Luella's discovered a few new abilities, haven't you dear? Go on, show him."

Luella got up nervously. She wasn't entirely sure what she was supposed to do, nor was she sure it would actually work with an audience. She looked at Snape. He was leaning back in his chair, looking rather bored. Mrs. Tyler's words earlier came back to her. "You can make people notice you, really notice you, can't you?" Luella turned and walked to the far wall, before turning around and concentrating. Bored by me, are you? she thought. We'll see. I am the Redeemer, let's have some respect!

Luella tossed her hair back proudly and felt the power surge through her. Folding her arms, she gazed coolly into her House Head's eyes. It had the desired effect. Snape's eyes widened, and he had to steady himself to avoid his chair falling backwards. Corvus squawked and fluttered back to his perch. Luella felt her spine tingling. Ah, not so bored now, are you? she smiled to herself. Grinning unashamedly, she looked away, turned to the left and stepped towards the door. Reversing the power, she thought, don't notice me. Don't see me at all.

Luella shot another glance at Snape. He was staring at where she had been in astonishment. Smiling wickedly, she walked quietly so she was standing behind his chair, dropped her invisibility and coughed quietly.

"Um... sir? I'm over here."

Snape twisted round, startled. However, he swiftly recovered his usual composure, giving her an appreciative smile.

"I'm impressed." he said. "So now there's two Glamourers in my immediate social circle. And that brings the total number of them in the British Isles to...?"

"Two." Mrs. Tyler said. She was no longer smiling. "Sit down, Luella, love. There's a lot we need to discuss."

Luella did so, curious. "What's a Glamourer?"

"One who has the rare and dangerous power known as Glamoury." Snape told her. "And as Caitlin so rightly tells me, you and she are the only two known ones in the country. Once in a generation do we get even one. Rare indeed is it to find two."

Luella's mind reeled. "Oh my god." she whispered, unable to take it in. She looked at Snape. "How? I mean, why me? Does it have anything to do with...?"

"With your fate?" Mrs. Tyler said. "Yes, Luella, it may well do. Before the Fall of Slytherin, it was a relatively common power. Particularly among certain bloodlines. Have you ever heard of the Tal-y-Rhys family?"

"Yes." Luella said. "Your ancestors, aren't they?"

"They are indeed." Mrs. Tyler smiled. "And in times past, they were the most powerful magical family in these islands. They were here when the Romans came, they were here right up until the Norman conquest. The ordinary Muggles, back in the days when they were aware of us, referred to all us mages as the Fae, or the Fair Folk, but the word was also used specifically about the Tal-y-Rhys, by mage and Muggle alike. We were a breed apart, and most of the powerful mages of those days were related to us in one way or another. Rowena Ravenclaw was one of us. So was Salazar Slytherin. Which goes a long way towards explaining why Slytherins have historically got on better with Ravenclaws than with any other house. However, I digress. The point is, we were noted for hereditary abilities that other mages did not possess, referred to as the Gifts of the Fae. One of which is Glamoury."

"And you and I both have it." Luella said quietly. "What is it though?"

"Nothing more or less than the ability to manipulate the thoughts and feelings of others by magical means." Snape said. "You tell someone mentally not to notice you, so they don't. Or you can command someone to not only notice you but to fear you. Or make them believe you're someone else. Or do whatever you want them to do. Which is why it's so dangerous." He was gazing at her keenly. Luella shivered under that hypnotic stare.

"To be able to do all that!" she whispered. The enormity of it hit her suddenly. She held her head in her hands. "I'm terrified."

"Unsurprising." Mrs. Tyler remarked. "It scared me too. I realised I could have the world at my feet, and when I'd got it, realised I didn't want it. So many Glamourers have gone mad, bad or both from their powers. Fortunately, I got burned sooner rather than later. I'm sincerely hoping you'll use them wisely."

"Wisely?" Luella stared. "I don't want to use them at all! No one'd ever trust me again if it got out that I could control people without them knowing!" She stared fiercely at the floor. "I don't want this. God, why can't I be normal like everyone else?"

"Well, you're not." said Snape unsympathetically. "Get used to it."

"Severus, go easy on her." Mrs. Tyler said gently. "She's only a kid. You should be grateful, most teenagers would be out there using them to seduce half the school, acquire some willing slaves, sneak out at night and generally get up to all sorts of mischief."

"Oh gods, so they would." Snape said thoughtfully. "Miss Martin, I want you to promise that you will not use these abilities to break school rules or unfairly influence your teachers or fellow students."

Luella nodded. "OK. I also promise not to allow Marlie or Deanna to talk me into anything stupid unless there's a really good reason." She thought briefly. "A really good reason other than winding up Draco Malfoy."

"Very good." Snape nodded approvingly. "Do your friends know about your abilities?"

"Some of them. They don't know the full extent of them." Luella gazed into the distance. "I don't know how they'll react to this. Although they already know I'm the Redeemer so it probably won't be too bad. I can see Marlie and Deanna being quite impressed." A thought occurred to her. "Mrs. Tyler, if Glamoury's restricted to descendants of the Tal-y-Rhys, how on earth have I got it? I'm Muggle-born."

Mrs. Tyler smiled. "Your immediate ancestors may be Muggle. But the Tal-y-Rhys weren't like some of the pure-blood families of today. They freely intermarried with Muggles, and quite a few of their descendants turned out to be Squibs, that is, had no magic. They tended to live quietly as Muggles, marry Muggles and have Muggle descendants, occasionally producing the odd powerful mage. So it's not so far-fetched for you to have Tal-y-Rhys ancestry. You're also a Slytherin. These powers only ever crop up among Slytherins and Ravenclaws. Every single person with a Fae Gift since the Founding has been in one or the other."

"The Hat wanted to put me in Ravenclaw!" exclaimed Luella. "Said I was certainly bright enough. Unfortunately, I got carried away with the idea of being the smartest in the year and top of everything, and the Hat decided that with a lust for power like that, I belonged nowhere else but Slytherin."

Mrs. Tyler laughed. "Where have I heard that before?" Snape grinned and looked away.

"Ah, come on, Caitlin, you can't blame me for wanting to be the best!" He turned towards Luella. "Yes, I too nearly ended up in Ravenclaw and for much the same reasons. I believe Caitlin was nearly a Gryffindor."

"I think cunning and obsessional tendencies won out over daring and sheer nerve in the end." Mrs. Tyler said easily. "Only just, though."

Snape turned his attention back to Luella. "Anyway, turning away from this no doubt potentially fascinating discussion on where we were nearly Sorted to, is there anything else you were interested in knowing? Or shall we leave it there?"

"Let's leave it there. I think my head'll explode if I have to learn anything else right now." Luella said, her mind reeling.

"Understandable." Snape said coolly. "Very well, you may return to your common room, where your fellow Slytherins will no doubt be wanting to hear every single detail of your confrontation with Voldemort. I daresay I shall see you again at the Leaving Feast?"

"OK." Luella smiled, getting up. "See you then. Bye Mrs. Tyler, see you Saturday."

"Until then." Mrs. Tyler smiled as Luella left. "Bye, Luella."

As Luella re-entered the common room, she felt her heart stop as every single head turned to look at her. The room fell silent, as everyone stopped talking and Marlie switched off the sound system without a word. Feeling strangely uncomfortable with

the idea of so many people focusing on her at once, Luella sought out Deanna. It didn't take long.

Deanna got shakily to her feet. "Lu. Oh, Lu. Are you all right?" she whispered.

Luella nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine." Deanna's composure broke down as she rushed over to her friend and flung her arms around her.

"Oh, Lu, we've been so worried about you!" she sobbed. "No one would tell us what happened to you, and we've been hearing all these strange rumours about Voldemort and all sorts, and you were in the hospital wing, and so was Harry, and Professor Snape hardly left it, and, and we all thought something awful had happened, and that you were..." She couldn't get the words out. Luella comforted her tearful friend.

"Hey. It's all right. I'm fine. No need to cry. Sit down, I'll tell you all about it." Deanna nodded mutely and took a seat next to Marlie. Seeing the crowd of expectant Slytherin faces all watching her, Luella perched herself on a desk where everyone could have a good view. "Seeing as I'm going to get besieged with questions anyway, I might as well tell you all the whole story." Luella sighed.

"Yes please." Marlie said expectantly. "After all the rumours we've heard, it had better be good."

"Oh, it is." Luella promised. Settling back and producing a quick glamour to ensure attentiveness, she began to tell the story, leaving out any references to Glamoury or Slytherin Redeemers. "It all started back at the Welcome Feast..."

Snape turned back to Caitlin after the door closed. "Well, Caitlin, the end of another year." he said, smiling sardonically. "And once more, you and me end up helping to save the day again. We make quite a good little team, don't we?"

"I won't deny we work quite well together." Caitlin observed coolly. She allowed the ghost of a smile to cross her lips. "Our little Redeemer's made quite an impression on you, hasn't she?"

"She's young, intelligent, fiendishly cunning and talented, of course she has. I always hoped the Redeemer would be special and I've finally been proved right." Snape sighed, leaning backwards in his chair. "Another Glamourer! I shall have to keep my wits about me with that one. She'll prove to be an interesting challenge. At least she's mature enough to handle it. Could you imagine what it would have been like if Miss Lovegood had got a Fae Gift?"

"I can." Caitlin sighed. "Marlie's quite bad enough as it is, what with all that veela blood in her ancestry. Glamoury as well?" Caitlin shuddered. "Doesn't bear thinking about." She smiled at Snape. "Well, with that dealt with, I had better let you get back to catching up on your beauty sleep. Gods know you could do with it." She got up to leave, grinning.

"Sharp-tongued as ever, I see. Does your wit know no boundaries?" Snape said, rising effortlessly to his feet.

Caitlin thought briefly. "No." she replied.

"Cheeky vixen. Count yourself fortunate I like you." Snape stood, gazing into her laughing brown eyes. Like you? Only like you? the thought ran through his brain. Without knowing quite what he was doing or why, he stepped forward, slipped one arm around her waist to pull her closer, one across her shoulders, his fingers running through her hair, leaned towards her and kissed her for all he was worth. And wonder of wonders, felt her respond. Felt her arm sliding round him, her lips opening beneath his, felt her hand go running up his chest...

Felt his head connect very firmly with the edge of his desk as she shoved him violently away, coughing and spitting venomously. Rubbing the back of his head and clambering slowly to his feet, trying to get rid of the stars in his eyes, he looked reproachfully back at her. She was rubbing her mouth, as if to get rid the taste of him, and glaring furiously at him, her face flushed. Does she look like that when she's aroused, Snape mused idly, then hastily banished the thought.

"Don't you ever, ever, do that to me again, do you hear me?!" Caitlin hissed viciously.

"Do what to you? Show you how I feel? Tell you how beautiful you are? Turn you on?" Snape asked, his voice tinged with the usual defensive sarcasm.

"I was not turned on!" Caitlin snarled.

"So it was a reflex action, was it?" Snape snarled back. "Caitlin, I felt your tongue in my mouth."

Caitlin looked furiously at him. "You... you... You took me by surprise, that's all! Look, just stay away from me. I don't want you that way, I'm not interested in you, just take the hint and stop bothering me!"

"Look me in the eye and tell me that." Snape said softly. "Look me in the eye and tell me you don't want me, that there's not a single part of you that has any positive feelings for me whatsoever." He walked over to where she was standing and gazed into her eyes again. "Tell me you don't love me, and I'll never bother you again."

Caitlin bit her lip and looked away, eyes shut. She didn't answer.

"Can't do it, can you?" he said, a strange half-smile on his face. "I thought as much."

"Severus, for Hecate's sake, just drop it." Caitlin whispered painfully. "Just... leave me alone."

"No." Snape said, feeling a new confidence surging through him. "No, I'm not going to leave this. I love you, Caitlin." He gazed desperately at her, searching for some kind of reaction, any kind of reaction. "I love you."

Slowly, Caitlin raised his eyes to his. Snape winced to see them filling with tears.

"Fifteen years ago, I'd have given anything to hear you say that." she whispered. "You could have had me like that." She snapped her fingers. Snape felt his heart sinking. Caitlin turned away and headed for the door. Before leaving, she turned and looked back at him.

"I loved you once, Severus." she said quietly. "Maybe somewhere deep inside, part of me still does. But I can't forget the past. And I can't forgive you. I'm sorry." Turning away, she opened the door and walked swiftly away, as if to put as much distance between them as possible, as quickly as possible, leaving Snape standing there alone, staring at the door closing quietly behind her.

The atmosphere on the Slytherin table at the Leaving Feast was even more exuberant than usual. Once more, Slytherin were the undoubted champions. The Quidditch Cup was already there, taking pride of place in the middle of the table, with little green and silver ribbons decorating it. And by the end of the evening, given the current points tally, the House Cup would be joining it.

"Another good year!" Marlie sighed. "Ah, Deanna, is there anything that can stop us?"

"Don't get too cocky." Rianne warned her. "It could still all go horribly wrong."

Marlie and Deanna stopped congratulating each other and turned to look at her in surprise. "How?" Marlie asked sceptically.

"Yeah, how? What could possibly close a one hundred and twenty point gap?" Deanna asked.

Rianne shrugged. "I don't know. But I still have this gut feeling that we're not out of the woods yet."

"You worry too much, Ri." grinned Deanna. "I'm telling you, the Cup's ours."

Luella motioned for quiet. "Never mind all that. Dumbledore's getting up!"

Silence fell around the Great Hall as everyone stopped talking and started listening. "Another year gone!" said Dumbledore cheerfully. "And I must trouble you with an old man's wheezing waffle before we sink our teeth into our delicious feast. What a year it has been! Hopefully your heads are all a little fuller than they were... you have the whole summer ahead to get them nice and empty before next year starts..."

"Now, as I understand it, the House Cup here needs awarding and the points stand thus: in fourth place, Gryffindor, with three hundred and twelve points; in third, Hufflepuff, with three hundred and fifty two; Ravenclaw have four hundred and five and Slytherin, four hundred and twenty two."

All around them, cheers broke out up and down the table. Luella noticed Mike Lovegood nearly throttling Jordan Foxworth with a hug. Draco was banging his goblet on the table while Kat Stormosi and Summer Montague high-fived each other.

"Yes, yes, well done Slytherin." said Dumbledore. "However, recent events must be taken into account."

Across the table, Marlie and Deanna put each other down and looked quizzically at each other. Next to Luella, Rianne hid her eyes and murmured "I was afraid of this." The room went deadly quiet, and all down the table, Slytherins were giving each other nervous looks.

"Ahem." coughed Dumbledore. "I have a few last minute points to dish out. Let me see... First, to Miss Luella Martin of Slytherin."

Luella felt herself go red as the entire school turned to look at her. Feeling eternally grateful she was sitting with her back to most of them, she lowered her eyes to avoid the attention.

"For outstanding prowess in Defence Against the Dark Arts and outdoing her own teacher, I award Slytherin fifty points."

The table erupted. Luella blushed furiously, staring at the ground. Rianne hugged her and could be heard yelling "You go, girl!" while Deanna's voice, carrying across the entire room, was saying "My best friend you know, taught her everything she knows about Dark mages."

Dumbledore spoke again. The Slytherins stopped cheering and calmed down to listen.

"Next, to Mr. Ronald Weasley, for the best-played game of chess Hogwarts has seen in many years, I award Gryffindor house fifty points."

The Gryffindor table erupted. Across the Slytherin table, Deanna was hastily doing some adding up. "Well, if all three of them get fifty points, then they'll be ahead by forty, but then with Lu's fifty points factored in, we'll still be ten points ahead. It's OK. It'll be OK. We'll still win."

Dumbledore was speaking again. "Thirdly, to Miss Hermione Granger. For the use of cool logic in the face of fire, I award Gryffindor house fifty points."

Over the roar of Gryffindor cheers, Luella could hear Marlie whimpering and Rianne whispering "This is going to be too close for comfort!"

"Fourth, to Mr. Harry Potter." The room went dead. Even Deanna looked worried.

"For pure nerve and outstanding courage, I award Gryffindor house sixty points."

"Sixty???" Deanna screamed. "What did he do that Lu didn't?"

Rianne was hastily doing the necessary maths. "So that's four hundred and twenty two plus fifty, that's four hundred and seventy two for us. And three hundred and twelve for them, plus one hundred for Ron and Hermione is four hundred and twelve, plus Harry's sixty is... four hundred and seventy two." She looked up in horror. "They're level. It's a draw."

Marlie howled. "Noooo!! It can't be a draw, it can't be!" She buried her head in her hands.

"Better than losing!" Deanna snapped. "Well, I suppose they did earn it." She shrugged. "What the hell."

Quiet gradually returned. Dumbledore stepped up. Luella felt her heart sink. One more point either way would decide things and she had a feeling he was not done yet. "There are all kinds of courage. It takes a great deal of bravery to stand up to our enemies, but just as much to stand up to our friends. I therefore award ten points to Mr. Neville Longbottom."

The Gryffindor table went wild. Cheering and screaming rent the air as Neville found himself mobbed by his housemates. It couldn't have contrasted more with the mood on the Slytherin table.

No one said a word, just stared in shock. Deanna was first to speak.

"We lost." she whispered. "We... lost. They beat us. They actually beat us. They won!"

Next to her, Marlie slumped forward onto the table, head buried in her arms, blonde hair covering her like a shroud.

"Ten points." Rianne said. "Ten lousy points! Damnation!" She pounded the table. "Tyler, if you hadn't skipped that lesson of Snape's back in December!"

"I was extremely distressed! What about Lu, losing us twenty points by grassing up Malfoy!"

"You leave me out of this!" Luella snapped. "If it hadn't been for me, we'd've been behind by a lot more than ten points!"

Marlie sobbed helplessly, oblivious to it all. "If only, if only we'd won that Gryffindor game!" she wept. "I'm off the team, my Quidditch career is over, it's all my fault!"

"Damn right it is." a voice growled from a few places down. Marcus Flint did not look pleased. "I didn't spend the last four years building a team to take on the world only to see Wonder Boy Potter and his Muggle loving friends snatch it from under our noses. Consider yourself dropped, Lovegood. You're a bloody liability."

Marlie wept even harder at this, but did not argue. Deanna tried to comfort her as best she could, but Luella could tell all too easily that the other Slytherins shared Flint's views, as the coldness in the air testified.

All of which meant that the planned end of year party got called off. Unsurprisingly, no one really felt like celebrating. Marlie just ran straight into her dorm crying, grabbed Snowy, drew the bedcurtains and refused to talk to anyone. Rianne withdrew to a quiet corner and tried to lose herself in a book. While Deanna said nothing to anyone, just strode in, ripped the banner with its cheery message of "We Are The Champions" off the wall, rolled it up and stormed back to the dorm. Luella followed her.

She found Deanna stashing the banner underneath her bed. Clytemnestra had flown in via one of the ventilation tunnels linking the Serpent's Nest with the outside world and had settled on her shoulder. Deanna tickled the falcon on the throat while gazing fiercely into the dorm fire. Luella sat down expectantly and waited for the rant to ensue.

"Did you see them all, Lu?" she whispered savagely. "All of them cheering and screaming, you'd have thought the Space Shuttle was taking off it was so noisy."

"They had won for the first time in seven years, Dee." Luella said quietly. "We'd have done the same if it had been us."

"Oh, we would have." Deanna said, smiling sarcastically. "But would Ravenclaw? Or Hufflepuff? Because they were tonight. Cheering for Gryffindor, for no other reason than that they beat us." She raised her eyes to look at Luella. "This is what you're up against, Lu. They hate us. They hate us when we win, they despise us when we don't. We're the lowest of the low to them. These green and silver sashes that we wear so proudly, they're like a yellow star to a Nazi as far as that lot are concerned."

"You don't mean that." Luella said quietly.

"No? Not seen the way Ron Weasley looks at you when he thinks you can't see him? Don't remember the way Fred and George used to taunt us before accidentally traumatising Rianne? Forgotten already how willing Harry, Ron and Hermione were to believe Snape was working for Voldemort? And how they believed he'd recruited you? Do you really think they'd have believed it if Snape was head of Ravenclaw? Or if the Sorting Hat had gone the other way and put you there? Come on. In their minds, Slytherin equals Death Eater, and you and I both know it. They don't trust us. All Slyths are bastards, that's their motto. Hell, they're probably right." Deanna looked depressed.

"We're not. You know we're not. Harry and Hermione know we're not." Luella said quietly.

"Wow! Support from two non-Slyths! Fantastic! Excuse me while I get the champagne out!" Deanna seemed less than thrilled.

Luella got up and went over to Deanna. "That'll change. It will change. There will come a day when they'll all change their minds about us. When the Wheel of Fortune drops you to your lowest point, the only way to go is back up again." She felt her own anger at being cheated of victory start to come through. "I'm going to do it, Deanna."

I'm going to redeem Slytherin. I'm going to singlehandedly wipe out the biggest threat to our kind there's ever been, and I'm going to be worshipped for it. And the name of Slytherin will never be used as an insult again. I swear it, Deanna. I swear it on the Great Serpent."

Deanna gazed into her friend's eyes and started to smile. "You mean it too, don't you?"

Luella nodded. She'd never felt so certain about anything before in her life. All of a sudden, the destiny she'd feared didn't seem like a punishment any more.

"Too right I mean it. I'm sick of being looked down on. My own house think I'm weak, and everyone else thinks I'm untrustworthy. And I'm getting just a bit tired of it."

"I don't think you're either, and I never have." Deanna grinned. "And I am with you every step of the way. Consider me your loyal sidekick. Your partner in crime. We can be Slytherin's answer to the Weasley twins. Well, we're practically sisters anyway."

"We'll avenge Slytherin together." Luella grinned. "The Twin Avengers, Tyler and Martin. I like that!"

"To us, then." Deanna laughed. "To the Twin Avengers!"

"The Twin Avengers." Luella smiled. The two of them clasped each others' hands. And there and then, Luella felt that nothing could stand in her way.

FINIS

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